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Redefining the **META** at
VRMMO Academy

story: Hayaken

illustration: Hika Akita

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Chapter 1: The New World of Summertime

After waking up early in the morning, I trudged to the kitchen and expressed my demands with a loud yawn.

“Haaah... I’m starving. Morning, Mom. Where’s breakfast?”

Either Mom was half-asleep or her natural airheadedness was more potent than usual. Casting me an absentminded look, she replied, “Oh, hello, Ren. Aren’t you late? Are you gonna make it to class?”

“No worries. Summer vacation just started!”

Some time had passed since the competitive guild mission. After another round of exams, it was finally time to kick back and relax.

“You’re just a bundle of energy. What are your plans?”

“Heh, you oughta know. Gaming, gaming, and more gaming—without having to go to class!”

During summer vacation, of course, there would be no classes, but we were still able to log in to Unlimited World itself. Plus, we weren’t subjected to the forced logout time. It was a 24/7 gamer party!

What could I do but take them up on that? Finally, I had time for all that testing I wanted to do!

Normally, log-ins were restricted to the space between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. As a result, adventuring and level-grinding were the big priorities, often leaving testing on the back burner. And trust me, I had plenty of things I wanted to test!

“Ahahaha! Same as usual, then. Well, how about last night’s leftover curry?”

“They’ve got a big, ongoing summer event, so of *course* I’m gonna play! And yeah, curry sounds great!”

The summer event involved all kinds of limited-time activities, so other players had plenty of stuff to enjoy.

Once I finished breakfast, I'd log in right away. Akira and I had plans to meet up. Would we start off with the summer event Akira was so hyped for or the testing I wanted to do? No doubt answering that question would be first on our agenda.

Maybe we'll settle it with a duel at the training grounds, I thought as I chowed down on my beloved mother's curry.

Casually flicking on the TV, I tuned in to a breaking news report.

"Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry Aoyagi has broken his leg in a car accident during a visit," I heard the newscaster say.

"What?! That's Akira's granddad!"

Due to a recent reorganization of the Cabinet, Akira's grandfather was now a minister. She had told me he was a politician, but I'd had no idea he was *that* big a deal. When the name "Aoyagi" came up on the news, I figured it might be related to him. My hunch turned out to be right on the money.

He okay, though? I'll have to ask Akira when I get the chance.

Having eaten a later breakfast than usual, I wasted no time logging in to UW. We were supposed to meet at 11:00 a.m. sharp.

I logged into the guild house living area and found that Akira was already there waiting for me. She was sitting on the couch, playing with Draco in her lap.

"Yo, Akira! Hi, Draco!"

"Good morning!"

"Chirp! Ren, morning!"

Draco was getting better and better at language. Once he grew up to be a big-boy dragon, would his voice sound more mature?

"Akira, I saw your gramps on the news. Is he gonna be all right?"

"Oh, yeah. First off, I'm so sorry! Granddaddy went to the hospital, but he's not in danger or anything. Turns out, I need to go and visit him today. My parents aren't at home, so it's up to me, pretty much. I gotta go really soon,

actually.”

“Dang, okay. You should probably get going, then. Best of luck to ya.”

“Yeah. Sorry again; I know we made a promise.”

“C’mon, it’s an emergency. Not your fault. You could’ve sent me a message instead of waiting here, though.”

“Hmm... I have some stuff to do with the fam starting tomorrow, so I might not be back for a few days. I just wanted to see your face before I go.”

“Don’t you see me all the time?”

“I mean, yeah. But that just means it’ll be weird *not* seeing you for a while.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep! Get a load of my face while you can, Ren, ’cause you’ll be missing out. Now’s your chaaance.”

She poked my cheek. Akira really liked to pile on the teasing when she could.

“Cut it out. Hmph, fine. I’ll take a good look!” I said, staring right at the cleavage exposed by her sword dancer outfit.

Looking fine as usual. Pretty and plump.

“H-Hey, stop! That’s not what I meant! Ugh... This is just weird!”

“Okay, looking complete! All good now.”

“Jeez! Seriously, you’d better not treat anyone else like this, or you’ll go to jail in a second. Got it?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Do you? Well... Okay, it’s time for me to go.”

“Gotcha. Look after your gramps, all right?”

“For sure. Later, Ren!”

“Yep. Later!”

Akira waved with a smile, then flickered and disappeared. She had logged out.

The only ones left now were a boy and his dragon. Maeda and Yano wouldn’t

be coming either, as they had other stuff to do.

“What do I do now, buddy? My schedule just cleared right up.”

I'd really prefer to have Akira's help with testing. Maybe I should check out the limited-time event on my own? Oh, speaking of! They finally added some new symbologist magic in the summer update.

I still hadn't grabbed that, so perhaps now was a good time. New magic was always exciting. Though, seeing as symbologist was King of the Bummers, it was probably very hit or miss. But as long as it was my class's magic, I couldn't just ignore it.

“I got it. Time for a rare solo magic-retrieval run. Let's go, Draco!”

“Chirp! Walkies, walkies!”

With Draco on my shoulder, I exited the guild house.

Now, as for the new symbologist magic, the method of obtaining it was already clear: a lottery in the shopping district of Telluna. The scroll for it was among the prizes that would be given away. Tickets for this lottery were handed out for free when you bought items in Telluna's shops. But this only worked for normal, NPC-run shops—not the guild shops that players operated.

NPC shops changed out their stock now and again, but you'd never find anything *that* rare. Frankly, once you reached a certain level, they weren't worth visiting anymore. You'd deal mainly with guild shops after that.

They *were* good for stocking up on crafting materials, as they never ran out of stock, but they didn't have rare mats. Basically, you just came and bought in bulk whenever you needed a large amount of crafting materials.

It was typically cheaper to buy at guild shops, so you were better off going to multiple shops to buy if you didn't mind the effort. If you wanted to get in on the lottery, though, you were forced to use normal shops.

Currently, my main problem was that I didn't have much money. If I bought in bulk, I'd run out in no time. But boy, did they have just the thing for poor people like me—a quest that dispensed lottery tickets as rewards! The gist was that a young NPC named Mina had dropped items while doing errands, and you

had to retrieve them for her. A fetch quest, in other words.

I went straight to find Mina.

“Excuse me, mister! My mommy asked me to bring her three Expensive Slime Jellies, but I lost them! She’s gonna get really mad...”

“Not a problem. I’ll help you find them!”

“Wow, really? Thank you!”

Ping! went a system notification. A message was displayed.

Quest “Mina’s Lost Items” has begun!

[Quest Summary]

Mina has lost some items that her mommy asked her to buy. Help Mina by finding a way to replace the items.

Yep, there it is.

This was the kind of quest that you could repeat endlessly, though the items required would change each time. Each time you delivered them, the quest was done. It didn’t matter how you obtained them.

This time, she wanted Expensive Slime Jellies. If you can believe it, they were expensive. The best option was to go farming for them. My drop luck was pretty poor, but this was the only way.

Expensive Slime Jellies were dropped by slime-type enemies, but as they were of a higher quality, only high-leveled slimes could drop them. Specifically, slimes higher than level 70. Currently, I was level 77.

I’ve got a feeling this is going to be a pretty thrilling material run.

Feeling pumped, I headed for the area known as Nikalai’s Marsh, where I would find level 70 slimes. It was a secluded area off of the coast of the Almishr continent, where Kokoru and the other NPCs hailed from. Nikalai’s Marsh had no towns or villages to speak of—just a vast bog as far as the eye could see, and a conveniently placed landing strip for airships.

Akira and I had gone there once for sightseeing purposes, so I was able to just warp right over, making my travel instantaneous.

“What a ridiculously large place.”

“Chirp chichirp! Biiig!”

Draco liked open spaces like this. He flew around the area, flapping his little wings.

“Don’t go too far, now. I don’t wanna lose you.”

“Chirp! Ren, found!”

Ping! Another system notification, followed by logs.

Draco picked up Expensive Slime Jelly!

Ren obtained Expensive Slime Jelly!

There’s my boy’s Pickup ability! This little guy makes my life so much easier!

“Ooh! Nice job, Draco! That’s a huge help.”

“Chichirp!”

“Just two more now. Let’s find some slime.”

I followed the beaten trail for some time until, at last, I found the slime I was looking for: a level 72 Muddy Slime. Big and brown, he was bouncing his way around a pretty big puddle.

“Hunting time!”

First, I cast a wide-range Enfeebling Circle at my feet. This was the usual “empty my MP to prepare for my ultimate” action.

Then, I pulled out my Blowgun to draw in the distant enemy. As it was just bait to draw it closer, I used a normal dart with no special effects. Incidentally, my Blowgun darts were made using damascus ingots, as was the standard for my level.

The running cost of keeping up this strategy was correlated to my level, with

both rising ever higher. Truly, it cost money to chase drama—both in real life and in games.

Ren attacked!

But the Muddy Slime evaded!

Because I was putting all my points into VIT, anything that required DEX was a hard miss. If I didn't use unavoidable attacks when I really wanted to deal damage, I was useless. The more I leveled up, the more extreme and min-maxed that trend would become. Even so, there was really no point in worrying about it at this point. All I needed to do here was bait the enemy, so it didn't matter if I missed.

Riled up by my attack, the Muddy Slime started bouncing and rolling my way.

"Sorry, buddy. I'm gonna need you to hand over that Expensive Slime Jelly for the sake of Mina and my new magic! Ultimate move: Dead Eeend!"

Smaaaaash!

The purple laser went straight through the Muddy Slime.

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 4,632 damage to Muddy Slime!

Ren has defeated the Muddy Slime.

"That's it?!"

I wanted to see that "Ren obtained Expensive Slime Jelly!" log! Where is it?!

"Okay, well... Gotta wait for my cooldowns before we go to the next one."

Two of the skills that made up my ultimate, Turnover and Final Strike, required a five-minute cooldown period before I could use them again. If Akira

were here, she'd be able to reset all of my cooldowns in an instant. Now that I was alone, though, I was stuck waiting.

All the while, I bled more money with every weapon I sacrificed to my ultimate.

My one-shot, drama-cannon style was shamefully inadequate when it came to farming small fry solo. I was fine with that for the most part, but if I wanted the world at large to see symbologist in a new light, it was necessary to work around these kinds of issues. If I didn't make up a strategy and communicate it to the world, symbologist would go down in UW history as a total Bummer. After all, the convenience of soloing was an important part of a class's appraisal.

"Hmm. Maybe I should try taking down the next one without breaking a weapon."

Five agonizing minutes later, I was able to get back to work. Since I'd been resting during the wait, my HP and MP had fully recovered as well.

"Off we go, Draco!"

"Chirp! Found, found!"

Ping!

Draco picked up Expensive Slime Jelly!

Ren obtained Expensive Slime Jelly!

Holy crap! He knows just what I want!

"Thanks again! Just one more!"

I searched for the next slime... and there it was! This time, the slime was perched in the middle of a bridge that crossed over the marsh.

"Here goes. Enfeebling Circle!"

I drained my MP, targeting Draco with a field that slowed down enemy movement in case we needed to kite enemies.

When I targeted Draco, the effect of his skill, Target Marker, caused the circle to follow him wherever he went.

I followed up with a Turnover, then readied my Blowgun. It was equipped with Poison Darts this time, ready to poison my enemy.

Finally, I activated Shadow Dart!

Shadow Dart (AP: 0)

Hidden Weapon Art

<Effect> Fires a single dart from the enemy's blind spot. Hits once. Only usable once per battle. Grows stronger as HP decreases. Extra effect rate and potency increase as HP decreases. Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

Ren activated Shadow Dart.

Dealt 75 damage to Muddy Slime!

Having taken damage, the slime bounced over to attack me. But as I had an Enfeebling Circle attached to Draco, it slowed down as soon as it got within range of the spell. As long as I kept moving, it would never catch up. This marathon-kiting tactic was no different than the usual.

My strategy now was to wait for it to die from the poison's damage-over-time effect. As this strategy didn't require Final Strike, it didn't involve weapon destruction. Much more economically efficient.

However...

"Huh? Its HP isn't going down."

Despite running my marathon for a while, the slime's HP barely budged.

My Shadow Dart did hit, right? It ignores evasion, so it couldn't possibly have missed.

I looked back at the battle log and realized my mistake.

Ren activated Shadow Dart.

Dealt 75 damage to Muddy Slime!

But the log that should've followed it, "Muddy Slime is now poisoned!" never showed up!

"Dang it. This one's immune to poison!"

This was bad. Hidden weapon arts could only be activated once per battle, regardless of which weapon was used. That meant that once I used Shadow Dart—a Blowgun art—it would set a flag that made my Canesword's Quickdraw art unusable.

I usually avoided this problem by crafting a new weapon in the middle of battle, but as you couldn't hold two Caneswords or two Blowguns, I wasn't able to do that now. To sum it up, I couldn't use hidden weapon arts or any ultimates that included them in this fight.

"Fine, then. Time for a good old-fashioned beatdown!"

I used a potion to heal myself a little, paused the marathon, and faced the slime head-on. Ever since I obtained the Rush Ring, I became able to use bodily striking arts. While guarding attacks with my staff, I used my simple shoulder charge attacks to grind him down.

With all my points in VIT, my guard was thick. As long as I didn't mess up the guard motion, I would take no guard break whatsoever.

My strikes were only around 60-70 damage per hit. Slowly but surely, the enemy's HP was dropping. At this rate, I'd win one day! Or at least, I hoped so.

Muddy Slime prepared to activate Split!

No sooner did I see the log appear than the slime divided into two!

"Aw, crap. He did the thing!"

I forgot slimes could divide!

During normal beatdowns like this, enemies gained AP as well. That was why I wanted to try using Shadow Dart to win. But who knew he would be immune to poison?

This is what I get for cheaping out!

“I see how it is. Discharging Circle!”

This was a new kind of circle magic I had learned. I hadn’t been able to buy any magic scrolls around the time of the guild mission, but this was one of the few I’d acquired after the fact.

Its effect slowed down enemies’ AP refill rates. Unfortunately, it didn’t actually decrease their current Art Points; it just cut the rate of refill in half. This would decrease the rate at which they used their special techniques.

All right, I might be able to take them down before they—

Muddy Slime prepared to activate Split!

Whoops, never mind!

Now I was forced to continue this beatdown against three slimes... until there were suddenly five of them!

“You’ve gotta be kidding meee!”

Against five enemies, I couldn’t attack without letting some through my guard. Thankfully, I was tougher than a tank with my all-in VIT strategy, so I didn’t take much damage. We were in a real-deal mud-wrestling match!

I didn’t want to admit it. I really, really didn’t, but...

I can’t do anything without Akira!

Solo farming was a hard no after all. This was some light material farming for any normal player, but for me, it was a painful endeavor!

At that moment, something miraculous happened.

Ping!

Draco picked up Expensive Slime Jelly!

Ren obtained Expensive Slime Jelly!

“Nice!”

The third one has arrived!

“Chichirp!”

“Heheheh. Enfeebling Circle!”

I swiftly changed circles, targeting Draco.

“Good job, Draco! Get in my arms!”

“Chiiirp!”

“We’ll leave it at that for today!”

I turned heel and sped off, leaving my slimy foes in the dust as I headed to the airship port. Once there, I entered the warp that would take me back to the warp room.

Shame my fight against those slimes went to waste. All that time and effort, gone! But hey, now it’s time to play the lottery. New magic, come to Papa!



Immediately upon returning to Telluna, I made a beeline for Mina.

“Thanks, mister! Now my mommy won’t get mad at me! Oh, and here’s a little gift!”

“Ooh. Thank you!”

With a familiar *ping*, a system notification alerted me that the quest had been completed.

Lottery ticket received!

All right! I might need to come see her again for another quest, but I hope she

doesn't ask me for any more slime-related stuff.

Without Draco, my only way through would've been throwing away all my money. I also would've had to wait the full five minutes every time I got a kill, making the farm painfully inefficient.

Clearly, I had a few too many problems fighting small fry. I needed to either find a talent for casual farming or have Draco learn a way to help me out.

I could grab a Master's Scroll-type talent to learn offensive magic, but that doesn't exactly make symbologist look good in the public eye. It's the same as having Draco farm for me. If possible, I'd like to find a method that only symbologist can take advantage of.

That was my best option for boosting the class's reputation.

Still, you've gotta break some eggs to make an omelet, so maybe I should just grab a Master's Scroll for the time being. I do have some Merit Points from the big exam we took right before summer vacation.

Mulling it over, I headed to the lottery venue in the shopping district.

There were four tiers of prizes, each with their own set of rewards. The operator let you choose which prize you wanted once you rolled a tier. Some prizes had a distinctly summer theme, such as all-inclusive tickets to a limited-time, high-class resort area. It was kind of like winning an all-expenses-paid trip to Hawaii.

Leaving that aside, the new symbologist magic I wanted was among the third-tier prize lineup. Wizards, however, had their new magic in the second tier.

What is this, discrimination? Why is mine on a lower level?! But if that makes it easier to get, then that's cool with me, even if it does make me a little sad!

"One lottery pull, please!"

I handed my ticket to the old guy running the lottery.

"But of course, sir. Thank you!"

He spun the machine, one so old and rickety it seemed like an antique.

Ba-dunk. A white ball rolled out of it.

“Aw, that’s a shame. You get a tier-four prize!”

I stared wordlessly at the ball.

Bah. My luck really does suck when it comes to drops. This isn’t exciting at all!

I took my consolation prize, a potion, and sighed. “Of course I wouldn’t get it in one try. I’m nothing like Akira...”

Our naturally lucky gal was leagues ahead of me in this department.

Even if I wanted to go back to Mina, she didn’t lose things *that* quickly. I’d have to wait a while before the quest would pop back up.

“What now?” I wondered aloud. “Maybe I’ll put in some work at the guild shop.”

Stocking up on materials at a normal, NPC-run shop would give you lottery tickets at random. It was more expensive than buying at guild shops, but... maybe I could do just a little? I’d still have a net gain, at least. It would just reduce profit margins.

Either way, I just needed lottery tickets!

“Chirp! Chicken, chicken!”

Suddenly, Draco flew behind me!

“Argh! No preying on me, baw! Why are you like this, baw?!”

“Hm? Oh, hey, Kokoru!”

The one running around like a chicken with his head being chomped off was, without a doubt, Kokoru.

After our victory in the competitive guild mission, Kokoru had been appointed as a knight of Mishuria. Now his gear was much more... regal. But as he was a fat little chicken, he looked more silly than he did knightly.

“Ooh. Baw, Ren! Good to see you, baw!”

“What brings you here?”

“I’m off today, so I came to hang out, baw. But nobody was at the guild house.”

“Yep. Everyone but me is busy today, it turns out.”

After the guild mission, each guild’s hero NPC returned to their homeland. We hadn’t wanted to say goodbye forever, so we’d made arrangements for Kokoru to come hang out whenever he wanted.

Specifically, we’d selected the Return Whistle as one of our free item rewards for being the top guild. The item allowed him to return at any time he wanted to a warp point we set up. It never disappeared no matter how many times you used it, and it had a short cooldown time. We had set the warp point to our guild house and had then given the whistle to Kokoru as a present. Every member of Hell’s Crafters had been in favor of this decision.

As a reminder, we were able to choose three items that we wanted, but we gave one of them to Homura’s guild as part of our deal. So as a result, we were able to grab two items of our choice. One of them was used for Kokoru. The other, we still hadn’t used yet. We’d decided to hold on to it and only use it if something happened between us. It wasn’t like we had to trade it in immediately, after all.

“Shame, baw. Since nobody was there, I was bored outta my bawking mind! Then I remembered I had some lottery tickets left over from stocking up on materials, so I decided to check out the event, baw. I figured I’d bring y’all a gift if I pulled anything good, baw.”

“Oh, yeah. You did buy us mats, didn’t you?”

Whenever Kokoru came to visit, he would occasionally work the shop and help us stock up. Son of a merchant as he was, he just liked selling stuff.

“I’ve been so busy, I forgot to give you guys my tickets, baw. You can have ’em now, though, baw. Have you tried it yet?”

Kokoru took out five lottery tickets to give to me.

“Whoa, you’ve got five?! I can definitely get it now! Thanks a ton, bro!”

“They’re yours anyway, baw.”

I excitedly grabbed the tickets and handed them to the little old man.

“Okay! Five more, my good man!”

“Yes, sir!”

Surely I’d get it now! Time to turn the tables!

“Whooooo!”

“Tier four! Tier four! Tier four! Tier four! Just one more to go!”

Cornered in an instant!

“Ugh. This sucks!”

“You want a third-tier prize, bawk? I’m amazed you haven’t gotten it yet.”

“I see how it is. Hey, Kokoru, you try it!”

“Huh?! Why me, bawk? I don’t mind, but don’t complain if I mess up, bawk.”

“No prob. Good luck!”

Looking back, I figured I’d used up the last of my item luck when Draco brought me a Peregrine Iron Sword during the tournament. No doubt the cooldown on my luck would never end.

“Okay, bawk. Here goes.”

Rattle, rattle, rattle.

Kokoru spun the handle.

Ba-dunk. This time, a golden ball rolled out!

“Bawk?! I don’t think this is third prize...”

“Ooooh! You get a special limited prize! It’s a ticket to the luxury resort in an alternate world! That’s right—you, lucky man, are bound for Summertide!”

“Did you say ‘luxury resort,’ bawk?”

“Yes, congratulations! It’s effective for the entire time that the gate to the alternate world is open. Here you go!”

“Erm, thanks, bawk.”

“Good job, Kokoru! Looks like you’ve got good drop luck too.”

He was a lucky boy. Bird? Chicken? Whatever.

“Didn’t get the prize you wanted, though. Sorry, bawk.”

“Nah, not a problem. I can come back with more tickets later, but what you got me is limited. I bet it’s fun there!”

“Baww, yeah. Summertide, huh?”

The aptly named Summertide was an area limited to summer vacation. Essentially, it was like an alternate dimension connected by a gate that only appeared for a limited time each year.

Why would people covet such a thing, you might ask? Unlike the world of UW, which was limited to students alone, Summertide was joined with other servers or external systems. Yosei Academy students abroad, alumni, and the like would have access. For a limited time and at a steep cost, people outside the school could probably enter as well. It was as if the school officials were saying, “Here’s a shared area with the outside world. Go have fun with your friends.”

I hadn’t been there yet, so I couldn’t help but wonder what it was like.

“It’ll take some time before I can grab another ticket from the quest. Since we’re here, how about we go to Summertide?”

“Oooh! I wanna go, baww!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Can Kokoru and Draco go too? Before summer vacation, I think Ms. Nakada said something about being able to take Draco to limited areas. So that ought to be fine.

“The gate to Summertide is at the airship port. Have fun out there, kids!” the little lottery man told me with a smile.

“Thanks. Let’s go, boys!”

“Baww!”

“Chirp!”

Upon reaching the gate, I marveled at its ornate, fairy-tale-esque design, as if it belonged to some big amusement park. A ton of people were gathered in front of it, probably waiting for their friends to show up so they could visit Summertide together.

We aren't waiting for anybody, so we might as well just waltz right in!

However, someone accosted us before we could.

"Huh. Takashiro, that you over there?"

"Hm? Oh, hey, Kataoka. 'Sup?"

"Not with Aoyagi today, huh? Kinda sad."

"It's good for us to do our own thing once in a while. Akira's off visiting her gramps in the hospital today."

"That sucks. Here I was all excited, but you've just brought all dudes."

"You're a guy too, man. Heck, you're even alone."

With Draco and Kokoru by my side, I could never be lonely!

"You idiot, I'm not here to hang out!"

"Okay?"

"Lady Nozomi's gonna want to go to Summertime at some point. I'm scoping out the place so I can be ready to guide her when the time comes! That's diligence right there. A follower isn't built in a day, feel me?"

"I know what those words mean, but not together. Uh, you seem passionate, though."

"Damn straight!"

"Well, anyway. We got this ticket to the high-class resort in Summertime from the lottery, so we're gonna go see what it's like. You wanna come?"

"Whoa, can I? If so, I should go check out the places Lady Nozomi will wanna see!"

"No prob. I just read the ticket, and it says I can bring as many people as I want."

"Awesome. Glad to tag along, then!"

"Now the all-guys group is even bigger. But it's cool; I can take it."

"You're always surrounded by your harem of cute girls. Is it so bad to hang out with other guys once in a while?"

“I guess it does seem that way, huh?”

“Yeeep. According to my sources, men are tired of you hogging all the cute girls, what with you toting Aoyagi, Maeda, *and* Yano around.”

“We’re just gaming together because we get along, that’s all. I mean, heck, I thought Akira was a guy at first.”

“Yeah, yeah. No point in worryin’ about what other people think, anyway. People look at me weird since I’m a follower, but I don’t mind it.”

“You should probably mind it a little.”

“Off we go, Takashiro!”

He ignored me!

Thus, we crossed through the gate to the alternate world of Summertide. As we did, my vision started to warp and shift. As I regained my bearings, I found we were in an entirely different location.

A blazing-hot sun shone in the clear blue sky overhead. Powdery white sand tickled our feet. Nearby waves crashed audibly against the shore. We were on a coastline so beautiful that you’d think it was a painting. The vivid, cobalt-colored sea was an especially entrancing sight.

I turned to see that the gate was the same on the other side, as if it had just been plopped down on the beach.

“Ooh, so this is Summertide! It’s like a tropical island.”

Looking farther down the shoreline, I thought the island seemed pretty large.

“Bawk! It really is like a resort!”

“Aw, yeah. Lady Nozomi’s gonna love this.”

“You sure? I bet she goes to places like this all the time.”

“Dang, you might be right. Guess I gotta find stuff she’ll like!”

“You’ve got a one-track mind, Kataoka.”

“Pssh, you’re one to talk with all your giant-killing and stuff.”

As we bickered, a group of NPCs called out to us, jogging over. They were all

girls with animal ears.

“Welcome to the alternate world of Summertide!”

“Everyone, we hope you’ll enjoy your time here!”

“Have some pamphlets.”

Are these girls the resort staff?

Clearing my throat, I turned to one of them, an older girl with rabbit ears.

“Erm, excuse me?”

“Yes? What can I help you with?”

“I’ve got this complimentary ticket or whatever. Where do I take it?”

I showed her the ticket I had won from the lottery.

“Oh! That’s a VIP ticket! Wait just a moment.” She pulled out a smartphone-looking device and called up the resort. “Hey, we need a VIP room and guides for a few guests! Two men, one bird, and one dragon!”

“Bawk, I’m more than just a bird.”

“I don’t think there’s any point in correcting them.”

Suddenly, a great shadow was cast over us, prompting us to look up.

“Caw! Caw!”

Four monsters with huge wings squawked as they landed before us. I wondered if they were this game’s version of Gryphons.

“Aah, your Gryphon Taxis have arrived! Board whenever you’re ready, and I’ll take you to your room!”

The girl straddled one of the Gryphons. They came with saddles attached, making it easier to sit on top of them. We each boarded one, with Draco resting in my arms. Then, the Gryphons took flight, allowing us to check out the place from up high.

“Wooow. The island’s *huge*!”

Both sides of the island were covered in white, sandy beaches. At the center

was an amusement park complete with ferris wheels, roller coasters, and the like. I saw huge swimming pools and water slides tucked against a lush, green forest. It was the resort to end all resorts, and it took my breath away.

“That it is! This island is full of resort facilities frequented by people from many different worlds! Gorgeous seas, amusement parks, Gryphon races, underwater ruins, and even more pleasures await you! You’re free to enjoy this world as long as the gate is active! Your VIP room belongs to you for the entire season.”

“Wow! So we can use it for our whole summer vacation?”

“Yes, sir! Not to break the fourth wall, but that is correct!”

She really said “fourth wall,” wow. Glad she made it easy to understand, though.

“That over there is your VIP quarters!”

The girl pointed at a cottage below us, which looked as though it was floating atop the blue sea. It contributed yet more to the “high-class resort” image. And while the location was incredible on its own, the cottage itself was pretty big. It was only one story, but it was several times the size of our guild house. The deck facing the ocean was peppered with several beach chairs.

“Ooh, it’s big!”

“Bawk, it’s colossal!”

“We could fit our whole class in here!”

The Gryphons descended, dropping our energetic crew off at the front door.

“Why don’t you take a look inside?”

“Sounds good to me!”

“Bawk! I’ll go with you!”

“I’ll search it top to bottom! For Lady Nozomi, of course.”

With glee, we charged into the cottage.

“Whoa, it’s huge! Plenty of high-class furniture too.”

I had to wonder how much something like this would cost in real life. *Probably one or two million yen, I imagine!*

“Bawk! Ren, Ren! Look at all the clothes over here, bawk!” Kokoru called out from inside the walk-in closet.

There were Hawaiian shirts, swimsuits, gowns, and strangely even yukatas in there, among other articles of clothing.

“Ooh, what’s this? Look at all the different clothes!”

“You’re free to use them as you like. However, you won’t be allowed to take them back to your own world. These are men’s clothes over here, and that one has the women’s.” Our bunny-girl guide pointed at another walk-in closet.

“Huh.”

That meant the thing was just bursting with girly clothes, swimsuits, and yukatas, right? I wanted to take a look, but it just felt wrong. Like I’d be doing something I shouldn’t be.

“Time to investigate the scene!” Kataoka, on the other hand, had waltzed right into the girls’ closet.

“Dang. You don’t hesitate!”

“This is my only chance to see it, and I’m not gonna let it pass me by! Get over here.”

“Aw, jeez.”

Left with no choice, I followed him in. The sight inside was just incredible. Swimsuits and yukatas abounded. It was definitely worth it. But all I could think was, *Akira would look really good in these*. She wouldn’t be able to game for a few days, but I wanted to bring her here as soon as possible.

Chapter 2: Reunion with an Old Friend

“Bawk! I ain’t gonna let anyone swim faster than me, bawk!”

Kokoru was swimming around the cottage at an incredible speed.

“Hoo, boy! You’re one fast chicken, Kokoru!”

“Chiiirp! Go, chicken! Chicken fast!”

Draco and I watched from the deck, astounded by Kokoru’s speedy swimming.

“Bird or not, we chickens are great swimmers, bawk!”

He took another lap around the cottage, disappearing from view.

“Come on in, Ren! Water’s fine, bawk!” came his voice from the other side.

After our arrival, it hadn’t taken long for us to start goofing around. Kataoka had said he had to look for Nozomi-worthy attractions and had gone off to scope out the surrounding area. Thus, I was now alone with my two bros. I had told him to let me know if he spotted any new symbologist magic before he went, though. I was half hoping I could get the scroll more easily in this alternate world.

“Okay, maybe I will! Wooooo! Wait up, Kokoru!”

I fearlessly leapt into the sea. *Man, who knew you could even swim in-game? I’m not such a bad swimmer; I bet I’ll catch up in no time!*

Kokoru and I swam around the cottage for some time, but he was so ridiculously fast that I couldn’t keep up.

“Huff, huff! Dang it, Kokoru. You’re too much!”

Ugh! I’ll never be able to reach him like this!

“Ren, Ren! Look!” Draco cried, gesturing toward something.

There was a jet ski moored next to the deck. It was designed to radiate fantasy-antique chic, as was the style around here. Maeda would definitely be into this.

All right, it's time to bag a chicken!

"I'm gonna catch you, Kokoruuu!"

I hopped onto the jet ski and sped off, hot on his tail.

"Bawk! That's cheating, baaawk!"

Even he couldn't outpace the jet ski, so I quickly caught up to him.

"Caught you, Kokoru! Get on, buddy!"

"Bawk! Sounds fun!"

Kokoru clambered up the back of the jet ski when out of nowhere I heard someone scream in English.

"Aaaah! Danger! Get out of the way!"

I couldn't see her. Where was she?

"Up in the sky! Ruuun!"

Did she say "the sky"? Like, up there?!

"What the—?!"

When I looked up, I saw a girl hurtling down from the heavens! *What is this, Castle in the Air?*

With a loud splash and a huge spray of water, the girl fell into the sea.

"Bawk?! Wh-What's going on?!"

"Hey, you okay?!"

As she floundered and gurgled in the water, I reached out to pull her up. The girl was around my age, with blonde hair down to her shoulders.

"Ugh... Sorry. Thank you."

"Whoa, she's still speaking English?"

Oh, right. Summertide is a shared area.

Our school was located in Japan, but it was partnered with branch schools in other nations. Students from those schools could access this space. Most likely, this girl was from a foreign branch school.

Lately, I was improving my grades for the sake of UW, but my English still sucked hard. I wasn't exactly sure what to do here.

But the girl smiled at me and said, "Oh, it's okay. I'm real good at Japanese."

Thank God, she's a weeb! Weird, though. She seems so familiar, but maybe I'm just imagining it.

"Phew, that's way better! So, uh, why'd you just drop in?"

"That should be obvious. Y'know how Unlimited World just kills you outright if you fall from something high up, like an airship? I'm testing to see just how far you need to fall to make it happen! Gryphon taxis are available to fly you anywhere you want, so this is the ideal opportunity. Sorry to bother you, though."

Looking into her sparkling eyes, I felt I had found a kindred spirit. This girl had a love of experiments too! At long last, somebody who understood me!

"Bawk... Ren, this girl sounds a lot like you."

"Ren?! Wait, Ren Takashiro?!"

"Hm? Uh, do I know you?"

"It's me, Emily! Emily Moretz! Don't you remember? I guess it's been like ten years since we last saw each other."

"Um... Ohhh, Emily! Wow, it really has been a while!"

Emily was the daughter of a foreign game designer my pops worked with. Her family had lived in Japan for a little while, right in our neighborhood. We'd even gone to the same elementary school for a few years.

We did a lot together back then: gaming, scoping out enemy stats in RPGs, making our own little strategy guides using data we'd gathered, trying to play with special restrictions, seeing who could beat the game with the tougher self-imposed rules, and more.

Even now, we occasionally sent letters and emails to each other; Emily was kind enough to correspond in Japanese for me. Having relied on that all this time, despite having an American friend, my English was hot garbage.

“Good to see you again, Ren! I was hoping we’d meet up someday, but I never expected it to be here!”

“Yeah! Definitely didn’t think you’d just come falling out of the sky.”

“Me neither. Glad I did, though! See, that’s what they call fate.” She pulled me into a tight hug.

Her hugs felt entirely different than they had when we were little.

“Err, yeah.”

It would’ve been in poor taste for me to get more out of this little exchange. Emily was just an innocent gaming addict.

Pot, meet kettle.





“Bawk. You two knew each other when you were kids?”

“Yep! Guess it’s true what they say: take your experimentation seriously, and good things will happen!”

“Who says that, bawk? Ren, did they clone you and make you a girl, bawk?”

“Sounds like a compliment to me! Right, Ren?”

“Yeah. Experimentation is important; it’s the foundation of knowledge, after all.”

“Bawk. Birds of a feather, huh?”

“Hahaha! Yeah, we flock together. We’ve got the exact same interests, after all.”

Emily, sitting next to me, took my arm. She was big on physical contact. Was that an American thing? I felt like she had been more... reserved as a child. Perhaps that just meant she had really embraced her culture after going back to America.

After getting out of the water and returning to the cottage, we had sat down on the living room couch for a chat. As it was a VIP room, it was very luxuriously furnished. The antique-mirror-looking thing hanging from the wall was actually a huge screen, letting you watch TV or movies on it.

It was an in-game item called Staln’s Magic Mirror, apparently. You had to pay a pretty penny to get your hands on one. This was the biggest, most expensive one out there, and there was one in every room in the cottage. If they were anything to judge by, this place boasted an impressive price tag.

Laptops—the same kind as the Dealer’s Desk at Kataoka’s guild—were also placed in every room. This was incredible, as it meant I could do my analysis work smoothly without having to log out every time. How luxurious this tropical resort’s VIP room was, allowing me to give it my all in style!

“This place is great! It’s big, beautiful, and full of facilities to help with my experimentation!”

“If you want, Emily, you could use one of the rooms or the stuff inside. We won’t be able to use it all ourselves, anyway.”

“Wow, thanks! I don’t have a Stoln’s Magic Mirror or a laptop, so that helps a ton!”

Emily picked up one of the laptops, brought it in, and started fiddling with it. One needed to set it up with everything necessary for real-deal experimentation and analysis, after all. I knew as much because I was in the middle of doing the same.

“Ren, Ren! Listen up, bawk,” Kokoru whispered.

“Uh, what’s up?”

“This might not be my business, bawk, but are you sure you wanna make that decision? Maybe you oughta ask Akira first, bawk!”

“Huh? I doubt Akira would care about something this small. We’re all gamers here.”

“Bawk... Is this something small?”

“Aah, c’mon. Akira won’t be here for a few days, anyway.”

“That’s why you should be careful when she’s not here, bawk! You don’t want to make her suspicious.”

“It’s cool, it’s cool. Emily and I aren’t like that. Like I always say, there’s no way someone can be a bad guy when they’re into gaming!”

“I dunno, bawk. First I’ve heard you say it. But if you say so, bawk, I won’t stop you.”

“Good. Sounds like we’ve made our decision!”

“Bawk...”

At that moment, Emily piped up, “Huh. Is this OS set to Japanese locale? Think there’s any way I can change it to English?”

“I think so, yeah. Should be this menu over here.”

“Ooh, thanks! Time to set up some spreadsheet macros...”

“Wanna use the ones I made? You can import ’em here.”

“Sure, thanks again! If you made it, I think it’s trustworthy enough.”

“Heh, who knows? I’m not sure if I can satisfy your needs after so long.”

“Mm... Nope, looks good. You know your stuff, Ren!”

“Good to hear! By the way, when did you start here in Unlimited World? I had no idea.”

“Just recently. The American branch of Yosei Academy scouted me, and I remembered you saying you’d enrolled here, so I figured it was a good opportunity. I *was* gonna tell you, but then I bumped into you before I could.”

“Scouted? Oh, right. You’re a pro gamer!”

Professional gaming was flourishing overseas. Emily had sent me an email letting me know she was kick-starting her pro gaming career. It must’ve been a year ago or so. According to my pops, who kept a much closer eye on Emily’s progress than I did, she was a hot topic—a rising star in the world of esports. With that cute face of hers, she was also very popular.

“Yeah, but I only just got started. I really wanted to drop out of school and focus on esports, but I guess this is pretty much the same thing.”

“I get it. They want you to be like their mascot to help with advertising or something, right?”

“Yep, pretty much. They actually paid me to come, so I’m learning and gaming on their dime. If VRMMO games get popular, VR might be the next big battleground for pros too. It’s kinda like I’m investing in this, in a way.”

“Sure, sure. It’s perfect for you, isn’t it? You’re the right age to be a student, you’re a popular pro, and you’re cute to boot.”

“Wow, okay! Look at you, calling a real-life girl cute. Guess you grew up, kid. Did you get a girlfriend and learn how 3D girls work? Good boy.”

“Stop ruffling my hair! I’m not a kid.”

It was better than Akira’s cheek pokes, but still!

“I’ll just keep this on hand while we’re here in Summertime. So, since we’re

together, I say we should game like we've never gamed before!"

"Yeah, for sure!"

"What should we do first?"

"Good question. Maybe a little test or two?"

"You wanna experiment right off the bat?! I wouldn't mind, but seeing as you've just been reunited with your 'cute' friend, we ought to catch up or—"

"Yo, Takashiro! I'm back!"

Kataoka suddenly entered the cottage, having returned from his lone scouting mission.

"Huh? Oh, it's just Kataoka."

"That's rude! Here I was, ready to provide you with some valuable information."

"Oh? Whatcha got?"

"I found that symbologist magic you were lookin' for. You can get it here, in the Undersea Ruins dungeon."

"Wow, for real?! Those must be the ruins the bunny-girl mentioned on our way here, right?" I latched on to that info right away.

"Yep, the very same. There's an entrance in the center of the island. The dungeon's official name is the Aswarth Undersea Ruins. Each floor's layout is randomly generated; when you go in, you aim to go all the way down to the bottom."

"Oooh, I get it. It's one of those mystery dungeons!"

It was similar to the Sky Fissures, but on a bigger scale. Or maybe like multiple Sky Fissures chained together.

"If you wanna put it simply, then sure. But there are conditions to progress through each floor, so each one poses a different problem. With a time limit too."

"Well, that just sounds like a mystery dungeon with extra steps."

“Quit saying that! Anyway, you bring back some school-related items from the ruins, and they let you trade ’em in for gear, magic scrolls, ingredients, and so on. There’s an admission fee, though. They were advertising it all over the place near the middle of the island. I’ve even got this item exchange list with me.”

“Ooh, sick.”

I took a look at the flyer Kataoka handed me. Emily peeked at it from over my shoulder.

“Lessee here... Wow, they’ve got a lot! Ren, do you see that magic scroll you want?”

“Yeah, it’s this one right here—Elemental Circle. They just added it in an update, and I haven’t been able to get my hands on it yet.”

“Hmm... Oh, I see! You need to trade a Fossilized Flame for it.”

“And you get that in the Undersea Ruins, I see. Might be easier than getting it from the lottery in the shopping district.”

I’d have to rely on my luck that way, and who knew how long that could take? Grabbing an item from a dungeon and trading it in for a guaranteed scroll sounded a fair bit easier.

“Baww. Yeah, Ren, you’ve got bad lotto luck.”

“Ugh, tell me about it. I feel like a Fossilized Flame wouldn’t be that hard to find.”

From looking at the list, it seemed as though Fossilized Flames were low-grade drops. Typically, these things had the best prizes at the top. This was at the bottom. Plus, there were a lot of options to trade the flames in for, including some pretty common armor and materials. Basically, that meant the difficulty of obtaining them would be equally low.

Skyfall, meanwhile, was in the second group from the top. A fitting position for it, rare as it was.

“Wonder what the top item is.”

“Rainbow Guard, looks like. Ooh, it’s a new item you can’t get anywhere else.”

“That’s definitely the eye-catcher. Oh, it lists the description too.”

Rainbow Guard (0)

Type: Armor

Level: 1

DEF: Increases based on wearer’s level.

Wearable by all classes.

Effect 1: Increases defense and grants stat bonus based on wearer’s level. As it is a rainbow given form, it has no fixed shape. Wearer is able to change its appearance at will. Can also take the form of other possessed items and armor.

Effect 2: Adds a talent slot.

“Oof! This is crazy good!”

“It really is.”

Emily and I were on the same page.

It was wearable all the way from level 1, and every time you leveled up, it would get stronger. You could pretty much wear it for life; you’d never need any other piece of armor. Plus, since all classes could equip it and could change its design freely, that meant even sword dancers could wear real gear instead of something super revealing, making it perfect for Akira! If she had it, we wouldn’t have to tiptoe around the issue like we did during the parentally supervised event.

Kind of a shame to think I wouldn’t get to see her in that beautiful sword dancer gear anymore, but it would be better than losing my best friend any day of the week. As a bonus, this gear came with an extra talent slot. I found this even better than its ability to increase stats based on level.

Talent slots were fixed at a hard five normally, but this would give you a total of six. Each talent slot was directly connected to powering up a player’s abilities.

Having another one could birth new builds, making the previously impossible possible. To my knowledge, no other gear could increase talent slots.

Anyone would covet this prize. I had to hand it to the developers. The gear's properties could convince any player who heard about it to grind their butt off.

"This is a clear favorite, especially since Summertime is a limited-time thing."

They'd look at this and think, *I gotta get my hands on this before Summertime goes away!* Then, true to the gamer experience, players would spend their summer vacation grinding in a dark dungeon at a VR resort. And their ultimate reward? One piece of armor in a video game.

Sounds like a great summer to me! How else are you gonna spend the longest vacation of the year?

"Welp, looks like I've found my summer homework."

"Should we go now, Ren? I kinda want to see it too."

"Sure. Let's go!"

"If you want that Rainbow Guard, you'd better hurry. It's limited to only a few."

"Seriously?! Oh dang, you're right! It says there are only ten!"

"Yeah, man. The entrance to the dungeon is already chock-full of people."

"We're missing the boat! Hurry, we gotta go!"

"Chirp chirp! Go, go!"

Apparently bored after staying in the room for so long, Draco zipped around in the air.



In the center of the amusement park in the middle of the island, as if to say it was one of the attractions of the park itself, there was a hole that led into the dungeon. If this had been a real amusement park, there probably would've been mine carts or something to take you on an underground tour.

But this was no trifling fun-timey attraction.

No, it was the backdrop for a race between gamers, where we would fight our way through the bottomless dungeon to aim for a unique, limited-time top prize. Those who had completed their searches were outside reviewing their gains, while those who were about to go in were forming parties and having strategy meetings.

In the end, games were for fun, but the zeal they inspired surpassed a simple desire to play. The Rainbow Guard had lit a fire inside all of us.

This was especially true for a certain hot-headed pair.

“All right, Yukino. Just this once, we work together for real. Got it?!”

“Heh, sounds good. That Rainbow Guard’s gonna be perfect for optimizing my PvP build. I’m not even an item fetishist, and I still want it. If working with someone like you is what it takes, then so be it!”

It was no other than Homura and Yukino. Like two lifelong rivals making a dramatic truce, they exchanged a handshake. Watching them, members of their respective guilds oohed and aahed, offering their applause. The two of them had mobilized their guild members for a full-on excursion into the dungeon.

Two guild masters, with the full backing of their guilds—two of the biggest in the game. And as they were twins living in the same household, coordination would be easy. They could just hole up in their rooms, practically side by side.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have the luxury of a planned-out collab where everyone had cleared their schedules. I was missing all my guildies: Akira, Maeda, and Yano.

“We’re postponing the family trip. Now’s not the time to have fun.”

“Absolutely. Nothing’s more important than this.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement. I’ll let you tell our parents. Good luck.”

“Hah! No. You can do it, since *you’re* the one who brought it up.”

“Excuse me?! You’re the older twin, so you need to represent us!”

“I’m only the older one when it’s convenient for you! I can’t just bring it up to them willy-nilly, y’know! Fine, if it’s come to this...”

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot! Darn it, tied! Darn it, tied again!”

They began a legendary battle of rock-paper-scissors.

I understood their feelings, but if they had plans, they really should’ve just gone. As for me, I’d figured something like this would come up, so I hadn’t made any plans for summer vacation to start with! That way, at least I had my bases covered.

“Tied again! Oh, there, I win! Woo! Yukino, it’s up to you to tell Mom and Dad! I hope they get so mad that you cry!”

“Argh... Fine! I just gotta make sure we clear this before the trip!”

“Uh, I think they’ll be really mad if you end up telling them the day before,” I interjected, joining in on their conversation.

“Hey, Ren. I figured you’d come here,” said Yukino.

“Yeah, I don’t have any trips to think about. Everything’s good and ready for me to spend my whole vacation gaming!”

My parents were always willing to let me focus on whatever I wanted to do, so if I asked to not go on any trips because I wanted to game, they were cool with that. Though I think they did say they’d go somewhere together.

Homura smirked fearlessly. “Heheheh. We won’t be joining forces this time. I know you’ll be a tough opponent, but rest assured, we’ll still come out on top!”

“Tough luck, Ren. I’d love to work together, but we’ve already got our parties worked out.”

“Also, it looks like the enemies in this dungeon scale in strength depending on the party’s levels.”

“Really?” I asked. “So they give you enemies around your strength level?”

Yukino nodded. “Yup. That way, no matter who goes in, the difficulty is about the same. At higher levels, though, our crew’s equipment and art array is gonna give us the upper hand.”

“Using Level Adjuster is a lot less effective, since it means you can’t use high-level equipment.”

“We don’t know exactly what the optimal level range for this is, but we figure we might as well go in fully specced for our first try.”

“I see, I see.”

That sounded about right. If you used Level Adjuster to bring everyone to the same level, that meant going in without the talent slot it took up. That was, in itself, a reduction of fighting power. An all-in battle strategy wouldn’t waste a talent slot like that. If they equipped something more helpful, their chance of success would rise accordingly.

It might have seemed inconsequential, but enough of these tiny decisions could have a grand effect on results. They couldn’t be overlooked. Start small and go big from there!

“Gotcha.” I clenched my hand into a fist, adding, “We’ll do our best too. Let’s see who wins!”

“Sure thing... but you know it’s gonna be us!” Yukino declared.

“Later. Try not to choke on our dust!” Homura teased.

With that, the twins headed into the cavern.



“Phew. They’re really putting their backs into it.”

In a way, that was to be expected, given Rainbow Guard’s abilities. I definitely wanted to secure one for my guild. It was absolutely necessary for Akira to be able to comfortably enjoy the game, and as the item’s only condition was O, we’d be able to trade it. If someone else wanted the extra talent slot, we could pass it on. All in all, it would be a boost for the whole guild.

If we planned things while taking an extra talent slot into consideration, we could come up with a slew of new strategies. The extra room to flex our creative muscles would be great.

Emily gave me a pat on the back. “We oughta get in there too, Ren!”

“Yeah! Let’s take a good look inside. Nothing happens until we investigate!”

Just as we were about to step in, however...

“Takashiro! Emily! Waaait!”

“Hm?”

We turned around to see Kataoka calling out to us.

“You’ve gotta buy a warp item to go in. That’s the entrance fee.”

“Oh, really? Where can we get one?”

“Over there,” he said, pointing to a ridiculously long line.

It looked like a two-hour-long wait, as if we were trying to get on a roller coaster at a packed amusement park. *They didn’t have to make it this realistic.*

“Uh, should we get in line?” I asked Emily.

“Guess so...”

We rocked up to the very tail end of the line.

An NPC addressed the crowd with a smile. “Welcome! All who would like to buy the Warp Stone necessary to go to the Aswarth Undersea Ruins, please line up back here! Make sure to keep it neat and orderly! It’s possible that we may run out of stock along the way, but please bear with us!”

Huh, she has animal ears too. Are all the resort staff like this? Is this just what

the dev is into? If so, his taste ain't so bad.

“Each Warp Stone is five hundred thousand Mira! If you buy the discounted set of ten, that drops to four hundred and fifty thousand! Also, each party is only permitted to have up to six people. You have thirty minutes per attempt!”

Whoa, that's a lot. We can exchange the stuff inside for pretty darn good items, though, so the price is understandable.

Essentially, the Warp Stones were treasure-hunting tickets. This wasn't just a dreamland where you could have fun for free. At such a high price, we would have to figure out how we were gonna finance these attempts.

“Bawk, that's expensive. Do you think you can afford them, bawk?”

“Hmm... Yeah, but not many. I've got about five mil to my name.”

The guild shop was operating as smoothly as ever, so I had a bit of a nest egg. That said, as the unit cost per drama cannon continued to stack up, it was easy to burn through five million Mira in a short time.

“Bawk. If we use that, you'll be almost out of cash. You won't be able to use your ultimate anymore, bawk.”

“It's cool. I've got plenty of ingredients stocked up, so let's buy the ten-pack!”

“Uhh, you sure? Don't blame me if you regret it later, bawk.”

“It's cool. I'm all about high-risk, high-reward! If we grab enough items in there, we might even make a profit.”

“I dunno, bawk...”

“Oh, hey. I can pay half, Ren!” Emily cut in.

That was music to my ears. “Ooh, really?!”

“Of course! If we're sharing the fun, we can share the cost!”

Emily was a level 79 armor knight. Our levels were close, and I hadn't partied up with a pure tank before, so this would be a fresh experience. Ideally, I would've been hyped to play with someone using more of a Bummer class, but I'd take what I could get.

She and I were a lot alike, so it was a surprise to see her using one of the best

classes in the game. Still, I couldn't complain about how she wanted to enjoy herself. I was just happy to be able to game with her again, no matter what classes we belonged to.

"You haven't changed, Ren. They say symbologist is the worst class in the game, but here you are. I remember you always picked the worst one on purpose because you said it was cool to make the weak shine, or something like that."

"He still says that, bawk. I can't remember a single day he hasn't!"

"So he's *always* been brain-damaged?" Kataoka muttered.

"Ahahaha! Yep, that's Ren for you! So, how are you using symbologist right now?"

"Heh, just going for the min-maxed, one-shot drama cannon!"

"Wow! Can I see? How do you do it?"

"Well, y'see..."

I gave my bright-eyed friend a quick lesson on my drama cannon setup. Since we were going on an excursion together, it was a good idea to teach her my style anyway. After all, I was doing something entirely different from my class's usual role. She'd probably end up confused as heck if I didn't tell her now.

"Aah, I get it. You weren't kidding about min-maxing! It's almost refreshing how silly it is. Must be tough trying to farm solo, though. Even if you get materials, the cost of your broken weapon means you're deep in the red. If you *don't* break it, then you lose to normal small-fry monsters!"

"You're sharp! I won't deny it. Just a while ago, I was trying to solo farm some slimes and had to run away in shame."

"Ahahaha! Thought as much! But it's not like you're gonna change classes. Gotta keep on keeping on, right?"

"Yeah! If I ever retire from symbologist, it'll be after the world sees it in a new light—when it graduates from Bummer status! Until then, I'm gonna keep on pursuing more drama!"

"That's our Ren. It's the only thing that gets your juices flowing."

“Darn right!” I said, puffing out my chest. “Oh, hey, Kataoka?”

“Yeah?”

“Your guild makes strategy guides, right? How about you put my symbologist build in there? If you did, I bet it would stir up some interest.”

“That’s outta my hands, bro. But it’s so hard to use, I doubt it’s gonna see any popularity. I think it’s cool myself, but I definitely wouldn’t wanna try it.”

“You never know! Advertising’s important. For all we know, some people might get inspired.”

“Nah, it’s not cool to trick people with just the positives. I’ll have to hear everyone’s complaints once they start struggling. I can’t vouch for it unless you make it easier to use. I mean, I guess I’ll tell the higher-ups at the guild, but don’t expect much.”

“Ugh... Well, thanks. Just goes to show the world at large doesn’t see it yet.”

“Hey, maybe if we can show off in the dungeon, your reputation will shoot up!” Emily suggested.

“True, true. All right, let’s show ’em what symbologist can do!”

Hyping ourselves up for the journey ahead, we waited for the line to progress. It took a fair amount of time, but in the end, we got our ten-pack of Warp Stones. I was level 77, Emily level 79, Kataoka 78, and Kokoru 103, so we had Kataoka use Level Adjuster to bring the gang to an even level 77.

Thus began our summer vacation homework, the excursion into Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins!

“Off we go!”

Upon venturing deep into the cave, we found a giant stone face on the wall, kind of like the Bocca della Verità. It had the face of a fierce beast, something between a lion and a tiger. Shining inside its fanged maw was a bright, golden light.

“Heya! If you wanna enter, just pop one of those warpy boys in my mouth! A normal Warp Stone gets you thirty minutes, while a Special Warp Stone gets you an hour. Super Special Warp Stones get you a whole two hours! Isn’t that, like,

so crazy?! By the way, each person can only come in five times a day. Plan your visits, 'kaaay?'

Why does it have a peppy anime-girl voice?!

"Little unfitting, isn't it, bawk?"

"For sure. Well, anyway, let's go with the normal Warp Stone."

As directed, I chucked a Warp Stone into the feline statue's mouth.

"Thank youuu! So, where d'you wanna start? If you have a Serrurian Dish, you can start off from a save point inside!"

"Say what? Uh, we don't have one."

"A first-timer, I see! Welp, guess I've got no choice but to give you one!"

An item that looked like a silver plate emerged from the statue's mouth. It had a pretty elaborate design with geometric patterns engraved into it.

"There're save points scattered inside, got it? Put the Serrurian Dish up to one, and your progress will be saved! Then you can start from there next time. Totally cool, right?! Of course, it'll get harder to progress as you go deeper and deeper, but there will be more good items as you go along! There might even be undiscovered items down there. Good luck, peeps!"

Okay, I get it. So you shoot for the save points as you go, extend your progress, and go as deep as you can.

We didn't know at what intervals the save points were placed within, nor what the clear conditions for each floor would be like. Nevertheless, I was confident we'd find out before long.

A picture's worth a thousand words, after all. You just gotta make sure you take the data from each pixel in the picture, test it, and analyze it! That's what it means to love experimentation.

"Have fun dungeoneering! A-hem! Make way for the gueeests!"

The air before us twisted and distorted, much like when we had first traveled to Summertime.

"Finally, it's our time to shine!" Emily cheered.

“Get hype, fellas!” I shouted.

“I’m gonna check every corner for Lady Nozomi!”

“Baww. Why am I even here? Guess I’ll do my best, baww!”

After the world before us shifted and changed, we found ourselves in a new location.

Chapter 3: Aswarth's Undersea Ruins

We appeared in a rectangular room with walls of blue-black stone. The blocks comprising the walls and ceiling were carved with intricate patterns. It almost felt like it was made of giant building blocks.

In the very center, packed together like a crowd on the rush-hour train, was a giant throng of brown slimes. There were easily dozens of them.

"What the heck?!" I blurted.

"Nobody told me these things would be here!" Emily squeaked.

"Whoa! Is this a trap?!" Kataoka asked.

"Bagawk?! We're in trouble, bawk!"

Bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop!

Naturally, the slimes reacted to us appearing in their midst and all came in to attack at once. Ambushed by this sticky flash mob, damage logs came rushing down our screens like a waterfall!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 31 damage to Ren!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 22 damage to Ren!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 19 damage to Ren!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 28 damage to Ren!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 13 damage to Emily!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 14 damage to Emily!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 15 damage to Emily!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 20 damage to Emily!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 55 damage to Shinichi!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 54 damage to Shinichi!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 66 damage to Shinichi!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 70 damage to Shinichi!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 256 damage to Kokoru!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 288 damage to Kokoru!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 222 damage to Kokoru!

Muddy Slime attacked.

Dealt 266 damage to Kokoru!

Kokoru is exhausted...

Oh no! Kokoru can't take direct attacks!

"Looks like it's time for me to go to the big farm in the sky..."

“Kokoruuu!”

He's dead! We're not even three seconds in, and he's dead! At least warn us before you instakill a party member!



Then, I heard a ding. It was accompanied by a message in the log window.

It's a Monster House! Monsters are spawning in huge numbers all over the floor!

"Shut uuup, I already know!" I couldn't help but complain, but the messages heartlessly continued to flow in.

This is a rare occurrence. Bad luck for you!

"But this is literally our first try! What kind of crappy game is this?!"

The gate is already open! Hurry and escape to the next floor!

"That's our only option!"

"I'll act as bait!"

Emily activated her area-of-effect taunt skill, Provoke. All of the slimes packed into the area turned their attention to her.

"Times like this call for an Enervating Circle!"

I cast an Enervating Circle, centered on Draco, to slow our enemies. At least, that was the plan.

"Hm? Why won't it cast?!"

"Whoa, what's happening?!" Kataoka shouted.

At his feet was a red light. *Is this some kind of trap?!*

The effect of the trap Kataoka stepped on appeared in a log message.

A Silencing Trap was activated! All magic is sealed on this floor.

“Aww, man! They’ve even got traps!”

“Urgh! Run, boys!”

Emily tightened her guard, guiding the slimes into a different room. However, as my slowing field didn’t activate, she was taking tons of enemy attacks. She was far too outnumbered. After having her HP chipped away for a while, she finally fell.

“Ow! Sorry, Ren! I didn’t think this would happen!”

Kataoka fell too. “Gaaaah! Might as well steal what I can before I go!” He used the last of his strength in an attempt to steal an item.

As I couldn’t use circles to drain my MP, I couldn’t manage my HP well enough. I did my best to guard, but there were just too many enemies, leading to me being attacked from behind. Surrounded by the crowd of slimes, it felt like I was being squeezed to death. Even if I wanted to use my ultimate, it included Turnover. Activating it would convert my full MP into HP, which wouldn’t give me the strength to kill an enemy in one hit.

I grunted in frustration as I reached the yellow zone, meaning my HP was at half. Then I was right into the red zone at 30%. Then 10%... and with no way to turn the tables, I died!

“Damn. I didn’t even have a chance.”

What a sad accident, dying on the first floor! I face-planted on the floor and groaned.

“Ah, c’mon, Takashiro. It’s not like we left with nothing. I got some good stuff,” Kataoka said, prompting a curious look from Emily. “Let’s just respawn for now.”

“A’ight.”

“Okay.”

“Bawk...”

Thus, we readied ourselves to respawn in the cottage. As long as we were in

Summertide, this would be our base.

“Man, we really got stomped out there,” I said bitterly.

Emily sighed. “Seriously, killed right when we went in. According to the message log, it doesn’t happen that often, at least.”

“I dunno if we’ve got good or bad luck anymore, bawk.”

“Calm down, kids. Remember, I’ve got loot.” Kataoka alone seemed satisfied.

“Yeah, you did say that. What is it?”

“This! I stole it right before we died.” Kataoka handed me an item that looked to be a red fossil.

Ren received a Fossilized Flame from Shinichi!

“Huh?! Whoa, this is the item I can exchange for that new magic!”

“Yep. You can have it. I figure if I can steal that, then I can steal plenty more.”

“Man, thanks a ton!”

“Woo! You’re not bad, buddy. Thanks for helping Ren!” Emily rejoiced as if my gain was her own.

“I mean, if I hadn’t stepped on that trap at the end, we mighta made it. Consider it an apology.”

“Aww, yeah. Let’s regroup and go at it again! I wanna trade in this Fossilized Flame too!”

“Okay, let’s do it! Time for revenge. We won’t back down that easy!”

“We’ve got this, bawk!”

When we got back to the dungeon entrance, I immediately headed to the exchange counter and traded in my Fossilized Flame for the new symbologist magic, Elemental Circle! I wasted no time using the scroll to learn the magic.

“Awesome! Let’s see the effect.”

Elemental Circle (MP: 30~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

Effect: Places a magic circle that grants the blessings of elemental spirits upon allies who enter the circle.

Symbologist only

Oh? Allies who enter the circle, huh? So this is a buff! Ohoho! Finally, the symbologist can wield buffing magic! Guess they finally decided to help shore up our weaknesses.

The king of the Bummers was getting the relief it needed. I'd thought I was putting in some good work with symbologist so far, but like Kataoka had said, the population wasn't increasing because it was still too unwieldy to use. Not only was the money-wasting attack style painful, but my tactics also relied too much on the people around me. Without a sword dancer at my side, I couldn't wield my true strength.

It was bad enough that I had to run away from those slimes when I soloed earlier. If this Elemental Circle made things more convenient, then I was all for it!

"Huh. I wonder what it actually looks like?" Emily asked, looking at the system menu I had open.

"Just gonna have to try it and find out. Let's go in again and test there!"

"Yeah. Let's go!" she said, pulling me along by the arm.

She always stayed super close to me—probably an American thing. It really made my heart skip a beat. Being an armor knight, she wore that rock-solid knight armor in battle. Normally, though, she wore some pretty revealing clothing. Not as bad as the sword dancer gear, but up there.

I couldn't help but notice the soft sensation of her chest pressing against me. This game was annoyingly realistic at times. But no, no, no! I frantically tried to cool my head. Emily wasn't Akira, so I couldn't focus on it too much. If she *were* Akira, I would've been glad to enjoy it to my heart's content!

“Oh? I saw you kids a few minutes ago. That was fast!”

The anime-girl lion head at the entrance made sure to poke fun at us for our defeat.

Shut up! Yes, we died quickly, okay?

“It was just an accident! This time, we’re gonna get it!”

“Uh-huh, suuure. Good luck! Make way for the guests!”

Once again, the air before us distorted, and we warped to a stone room. But this time, it was a large chamber.

Ping!

Gate Condition: Defeat all enemies!

Naturally, we didn’t get wrecked by a horde of monsters like the Monster House from last run. I saw a few enemies in the distance, though. Once we defeated them, the gate to the next floor would open.

“Okay, this is much better! Let’s take ’em down fast!”

While we fight, we can figure out Elemental Circle’s effects!

There were two enemies close to our warp point, both level 77 Aswarth Dolls. They were Magic Doll-type enemies, objects animated by magic. If I had to describe them, I’d say they resembled mechanical scarecrows with wheels for feet. Each wielded a two-handed flail. As if to explain the “Aswarth” in their names, their bodies were the same color as the stone blocks that made up these ruins.

“Woo-hoo! Let’s take ’em down one at a time!”

With a cheer, Emily charged toward the two enemies and activated Provoke, putting all aggro on herself. Following up, Kataoka took up his position behind the enemies while Kokoru summoned an Infernal Armor and combined with it.

As for me, testing was top priority!

“Woo! Elemental Circle!”

I cast a small-radius circle at my own feet. As it had a minimum MP cost of 30, it consumed a lot more than other circles. Naturally, making the radius bigger would lead to using up my MP much faster. Right now, I wasn't wasting my MP to go for a high-damage drama cannon; I was just testing the potential of Elemental Circle.

Gotta use that MP carefully! That's right—I didn't just waste my MP like an idiot all the time!

"Hmm... Ooh, it's red."

The Elemental Circle I'd created gave off a scarlet light. I could see shadows of flames behind it too.

So it's a fire elemental, then. According to the description, your attacks get some kind of blessing, right? I'm standing in the circle, so does that mean I'm blessed now?

I tried a normal attack, which sent a fiery bullet blasting out of the end of my Canesword.

Fwoom!

It hit one of the Aswarth Dolls fighting with Emily.

Ren attacked.

Dealt 66 damage to Aswarth Doll!

"No way!"

It hit him! It did damage!

DEX was a vital part of making physical attacks hit enemies. As I had ignored my DEX stat altogether, fighting enemies around my level meant my normal attacks would never hit. If that fireball hit him, that meant that it was a magic attack. One could liken it to the shock waves generated by Akira's Skyfall.

Having a circle with this effect was pretty darn good! At the very least, I would've been able to defeat those slimes with this when I was solo farming. This effect would make up for the symbologist's sorely lacking solo capabilities.

“Interesting. Let’s try another!”

Ren attacked.

Dealt 66 damage to Aswarth Doll!

“Oooh, nice!”

Fwoom! Fwoom! Fwoom!

Ren attacked.

Dealt 66 damage to Aswarth Doll!

Ren attacked.

Dealt 66 damage to Aswarth Doll!

Ren attacked.

Dealt 66 damage to Aswarth Doll!

It wasn’t much damage at all compared to the output from the rest of the party, but it was way better than nothing. I could do something similar by equipping a talent to give me weapon-enhancing magic, but it was huge to be able to do it by default. That talent slot could be used on something else, adding more overall power to the symbologist. If I could just redefine my solo abilities, this class’s reputation would shoot up!

While I gleefully shot out fireballs from my circle, Emily and the others took down the two Aswarth Dolls.

“On to the next ones!”

As we ran, Emily said, “Was that the effect of your new magic? When you stand in it, you get extra attacks, right?”

“Yeah, looks like it. I think it’s great!”

“I want it on us this time, baww. Put the circle near the enemies, would you?”

“Good idea,” Emily agreed. “We can kill them faster now!”

I was glad to be able to help right off the bat. A wider range of options in battle with Elemental Circle, *and* a drama cannon. The symbologist might finally graduate from Bummer-tier and show the world what it’s made of! It nearly brought a tear to my eye.

“You got it!”

Soon, Kataoka shouted, “Yo, found the next one!”

There were three level 78 Frozen Lizards. They looked like monitor lizards with scales as smooth and blue as ice.

Neat! The flame effect of Elemental Circle ought to work really well here.

“Come on and show me what you’ve got!”

Emily charged in, activating Provoke.

“Draco, follow Emily!”

I directed Draco and cast an Elemental Circle targeted on him. This time, however, the circle came out blue rather than red. There were also some snowflakes flurrying around it.

“Huh? That’s not fire!”

Emily and the boys attacked the Frozen Lizards while under the effects of the circle.

Emily attacked.

Dealt 165 damage to Frozen Lizard!

Emily attacked.

Frozen Lizard recovered 66 HP!

“Whoa, it healed him!”

As the name implied, Frozen Lizards had an affinity for ice. They must have had an ice-absorption ability. This was what happened when the extra ice

damage was introduced.

Oh, I get it. The element that comes with Elemental Circle is random!

This would be difficult to use. As I couldn't choose the element, I could get unlucky and end up healing enemies like I was now.

Following up, Kokoru and Kataoka also began attacking.

Infernal Armor attacked.

Dealt 87 damage to Frozen Lizard!

Shinichi attacked.

Dealt 107 damage to Frozen Lizard!

Surprisingly, the enemy wasn't recovering, despite the guys being in the circle. In fact, it didn't look like they were getting the extra attack at all.

"Draco, come back over here!"

When Draco moved, the Elemental Circle moved along with him. This was the effect of his Target Marker skill. Once in the range of the circle, I tried swinging my own weapon. This time, an icicle launched and hit the Frozen Lizard.

Ren attacked.

Frozen Lizard recovered 66 HP!

Oops, it worked that time! Sorry, guys! But what about it not working on Kokoru and Kataoka's attacks? What happened there?

I scratched my head for a while, as the rest of my party continued the battle. Slowly but surely, they were taking down those Frozen Lizards.

As a finisher, Emily performed a motion that resulted in stabbing her lance into the ground.

"Ultimate move: Crimson Calamity!"

Fwooooooom!

With the lance at its center, a billowing conflagration erupted upward. It shot out in all directions, burning the Frozen Lizards to a crisp.

Emily activated Crimson Calamity.

Dealt 1,877 damage to Frozen Lizard.

Emily has defeated Frozen Lizard!

Dealt 1,877 damage to Frozen Lizard.

Emily has defeated Frozen Lizard!

“Ooh! That’s the Deadly King’s skill, right? Good stuff!” I complimented Emily, jogging alongside her as we searched for our next target.

The Deadly King and I had a pretty long history together. Could his ultimate be learned? When I thought about it, I vaguely recalled him dropping a Crimson Calamity book upon dying.

“You’ve got a good eye, Ren. Full ultimates you can learn without Skill Chain are really important! You must have it too, right?”

“Nope, I don’t.”

“Oh, really? Have you not beaten him?”

“We did once, but we recruited him when we did. So we didn’t get any drops.”

“Aww, what a waste! He only drops the Crimson Calamity book the first time you beat him!”

“Seriously?! Aww, whatever. We did what we had to at the time, anyway.”

“I’m sorry, baww. I had no idea.”

“Nah, buddy, it’s cool. We needed that one-shot drama, anyway. It helped a ton.”

“What are you talking about?” Emily cocked her head in confusion, so Kokoru and I told her all about the guild competitive mission. “Ahahaha! That’s Ren for you! I love that you had that idea, though!”

While we laughed together, Emily found our next target and once again kicked things off with Provoke. It was a level 85 Aswarth Guardian, a pretty strong-looking giant made entirely of stone. Yet again, the stone comprising its body looked similar to the blocks in the walls. This one didn’t seem to have any elemental absorption abilities.

One more circle, here goes!

“Elemental Circle! Draco, stay by Emily!”

“Okaaay!”

“Hm... This one’s another different color.”

This time, the color was somewhere between purple and black. Perhaps the source element was darkness?

Emily attacked.

Dealt 122 damage to Aswarth Guardian!

Emily attacked.

Dealt 60 damage to Aswarth Guardian!

Emily recovered 60 HP.

Emily’s maximum HP increased by 60.

Infernal Armor attacked.

Dealt 58 damage to Aswarth Guardian!

Shinichi attacked.

Dealt 70 damage to Aswarth Guardian!

“Hey, what’s this?”

I looked at the log to find that dark Elemental Circles came with an HP-

absorption effect. Upon closer inspection, I saw that everyone's max HP was getting a boost too.

Aswarth Guardian attacked.

Emily guarded, taking 23 damage!

Emily attacked.

Dealt 119 damage to Aswarth Guardian!

Emily attacked.

Dealt 60 damage to Aswarth Guardian!

Emily recovered 60 HP.

Emily's maximum HP increased by 37.

From full HP, Emily had taken 23 damage. Armor knights really were tanky as heck. Then, she'd recovered 60 HP, and the resulting 37 HP overflow was added to her maximum.

Huh! How interesting.

It would have been a good support ability with just the HP recovery alone, but the HP boost was a *huge* boon for tanks. I wondered how long it would last.

As I continued to watch my party's stats, I noticed that each time Emily attacked the enemy, she consumed 5 MP. In other words, the added cost of this circle's weapon-enhancing effect was MP.

Emily's class, armor knight, didn't come with any magic by default. She seemed to be using a talent that gave her magic, though, and she had a small amount of MP as a result. Kataoka and Kokoru, on the other hand, had none. Yours truly had an ample supply, of course.

Evidently, if your allies didn't have the necessary MP to use the extra effect, it just wouldn't happen. I let out a thoughtful hum.

What does this mean, though? It costs 5 MP to tack on about 60 damage?

A wizard could take 5 MP way further than that. It was nice to have a damage

source for symbologist that didn't rely on talents, but it sucked that the effect wouldn't trigger if your allies were lacking MP.

Forcing the others to use up their MP could end up doing more harm than good, especially for classes like paladin, which had to prioritize MP for healing. Take Emily, for example. Her talent allowed her to use healing magic, but each time my circle's extra effect went off, it would sap some of the MP she needed to cast it.

As an added drawback, we didn't even know what circle we might get. The dark one absorbed HP and increased max HP, so that *could* be interesting depending on how well we used it. Still, it was hard to imagine how this could be helpful, especially in this world where value was based on predictable, quantifiable factors.

Maybe it's just something fun for people like me who have more MP than we could ever hope to use at once. If I make it just big enough for me and chuck in some extra attacks from a distance, that might help chip enemies down a little faster.

Clearly, the game developers didn't actually intend to make a dramatic increase in the symbologist's power with this new magic. They weren't trying to improve its value at all, really. It was as if they were saying, *Wow, look! You can do a little more solo damage now! Go you!*

Nevertheless, I would not be dismayed! I was ready to test and test until I found a way to make use of it!

Just then, Kataoka activated a skill-boosted ultimate.

"Scapegoat! Shadow Walk! Ultimate move: Double Backstab!"

Shinichi activated Double Backstab.

Dealt 2,724 damage to Aswarth Guardian!

Shinichi has defeated Aswarth Guardian.

Emily grinned at him. "Ooh! Nice firepower, buddy!"

Look at him, putting out big damage without even wasting all of his money! Rogues can drum up some pretty big numbers in an instant, huh?

“Aww, thanks. You must be a great Hime-chan, complimenting people like that. I wish Lady Nozomi was more like you.” Kataoka was strangely moved.

“Uh, what the heck is a Hime-chan?”

Guess weirdos like Kataoka only exist in Japan. I mean, maybe they exist overseas too, but they probably use a different word. Aah, whatever! I don't want to waste any more brain cells on this.

“Just ignore him, trust me,” I told her. “Let's keep going!”

“Okay!”

Then, we got another *ping!* and a system message.

Gate Condition cleared! Head for the gate to the next floor!

“Oh! Did we already beat 'em all?”

“There weren't many, bawk.”

“Where d'you think the gate is, Ren?”

“I bet it's that thing over there!”

Kataoka pointed at a circle of pillars connected by rays of light. It looked like a gate to me.

So if you go in there, you warp to the next floor!

We leapt into the warp gate. After reaching the next floor, the general tone of the dungeon remained the same. As before, the walls were made from patterned square blocks. Likewise, the condition to warp to the next floor was the same; with a *ping!*, the relevant message popped up.

Gate Condition: Defeat all enemies!

“Same as before. We’ve got this!” Emily shouted, then turned to Kataoka. “You go up ahead and bring back some baddies!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Kataoka activated Sprint and ran off. After taking a lap around the floor, he would return with all enemies in tow. That would reduce the need for us to move as much as possible. Without needing to search the place, we could focus on taking them down.

Emily had a wide-area ultimate in Crimson Calamity too. She was tanky enough to survive being surrounded, and I could run my kiting marathon using Enervating Circle.

Even if there ended up being a whole swarm, I figured we’d be fine. Our rapid deaths during our first foray into the dungeon had just been an unfortunate accident. We just had to use speed to our advantage!

After a short time, Kataoka appeared with enemies in tow. Having gathered enough AP, Emily blew them away with Crimson Calamity.

Thus, with no particular issues, we cleared B2F, the second underground floor! B3F, B4F, and B5F required enemy extermination in much the same way.

Kataoka’s enemy-gathering and Emily’s wide-range attacks were a powerful combo. And with my high-powered attacks, I could wreck high-HP or otherwise tanky enemies. I thought our four-man party was doing pretty well for itself. Emily’s joy upon seeing my drama cannon was the best part, though.

As we reached B6F, we were three minutes away from reaching our thirty-minute time limit.

“We’re almost outta time,” I fretted. “Where’s that save point?!”

If we didn’t save our progress, we would have to start from B1F the next time. We really had no idea how many floors it would take to save.

Kataoka squinted. “Oh, hey! I see something!”

We had warped into a narrow corridor. In the small room at the very end, there was a pedestal with some sort of jewel sitting on it. The words “Save Point” floated above the jewel.

Neat! They were even kind enough to label it.

“Woo-hoo! We found it!” I cheered.

Emily was just as excited. “Hooray! I’d call that a successful run.”

I quickly pulled out the Serrurian Dish and held it up to the save point.

Progress saved! During future attempts, you can choose to start on this floor!

“Good job, everybody!”

“Now we can keep going down, bawk.”

I nodded. “Yep, we’ve just gotta find that exchange item so we can get Rainbow Guard.”

“Betcha there are bosses here too,” Emily added. “I can’t wait to see what we find!”

“For sure. Okay, how about we just kill at random until we’re booted out?”

After wasting the rest of our time doing whatever, we were forcefully warped and expelled to the outside of the dungeon. We now had a pretty good grasp on how things worked. There were probably plenty more gate-opening conditions, but we could gradually pick those up as we went along.

It would be pretty neat to analyze the pattern and come up with a definitive ruleset for triggering each one. Imagine if we could pick our own clear conditions!

I would’ve been fine with taking another crack at the dungeon, but as Kokoru and Kataoka had stuff to do, we decided to defer it to the next day. As we had just barely made it with a four-man party, Emily and I decided that it would be too hard for us to reach the next save point on our own.

Maeda and Yano would be around tomorrow too, so there was no reason to rush things. Akira had said she wouldn’t be around for a few days, so it’d be a longer wait for her. Nevertheless, I messaged all three of my guildies about our cottage. Once they logged in and saw the message, they ought to come straight

here.

As for me, I was in a mood to experiment with Elemental Circle before our next run. It seemed that the element was picked at random, but I wanted to figure out exactly how many kinds there were and their activation rates. This seemed like a pretty complex piece of magic, making experimentation all the more rewarding.

My initial impression of it was that it was very “meh,” as it could end up hurting allies more than helping them. It wasn’t *totally* useless, since I could cast it just on myself and enhance my own attacks.

Overall, it seemed to be a “for fun” sort of thing that made solo work a bit more doable. Making a problem child like this work and shine was my true joy in life! The more problematic, the more satisfying.

“We’d better get going, baww. Later, baww!”

“Later,” Kataoka said with a wave. “I’ll stop by again, don’t worry.”

“Yeah, good work today. Come by anytime!”

Emily smiled and waved back at the boys as they departed. “Thanks, Kokoru and Kataoka. It was a lot of fun. Bye!”

This left me alone with Emily at the cottage.

“So, wanna put together data from today?”

I plopped down on the living room couch and opened up my Dealer’s Desk, which was set up as a notebook PC to be usable in-game.

“Sure. Though we only made it through B5F, so we shouldn’t have that much info.” Emily sat next to me, apparently willing to join me in my work.

After exporting Draco’s Dragon Recorder logs, I collected information on the enemies we had encountered, the gate conditions, and each floor’s map. The construction of the maps was probably random, but many games called things “random” while actually having some hidden contrivance behind the curtain. To formulate a superior strategy, it was important to excavate these little things and bring them to light.

I began drawing maps made up of squares on the computer, using my

memory to the best of its ability.

“Hmm... What was this one like again?”

“There’s a corner to the right. About three blocks ahead, there’s a dead end.”

“Whoa, nice memory, Emily! You pro gamers are a different breed.”

“Hahaha! Well, if my memory runs deep, yours runs wide. I bet you could be better than me. Have you thought about it at all?”

“Nah, not really.”

“No? I guess Japan is kinda behind when it comes to esports.”

“I mean, I can’t think about anything but getting my drama cannon going in this game!”

I couldn’t say I wasn’t interested in pro gaming in the future, but if I was going to make video games my job, I would rather make them than play them. Who knew how that would pan out, though?

“Ahahaha, sounds fun enough. You really haven’t changed a bit, Ren. Thanks to you, I had a blast today too.”

“What, isn’t being a pro gamer fun?”

“It is, but it’s not *just* fun anymore. It’s kinda hard for me to just pick a crappy job in this game like you did. Gotta put on a good show, y’know? Honestly, I was into symbologist too. Not that I don’t like armor knight, of course.”

“I get it. Every job comes with its own troubles. Pretty mature of you to think about it that way.”

“Heh, I guess. Watching you is fun, though. It was refreshing to see someone let loose for the love of the game.”

Emily hugged my arm and rested her head on my shoulder. I could still blame the difference in culture to an extent, and I always thought we were gaming together like brother and sister, but...

I shook my head lightly and used my free hand to operate the laptop.

Suddenly, Emily piped up, “Oh? Good evening!”

“Um, yeah. Good evening.”

The bewildered response came from Akira, who had just shown up in her uniform.

“Huh? Akira, what’s up? You said you weren’t coming today.”

“Oh, right. But I got your message, so I wanted to check up on you before bed. Ren, what exactly were you doing?”

Brrr! Man, oh, man. Is that a dark aura emanating from Akira that I feel behind me?!

“Wow, so *you’re* Akira! You’re the one who Ren thought was a boy, but was actually a really pretty girl! You’re cuuute!”

Emily stood and ran over to Akira, grasping her hands and bouncing around happily. Akira’s rising rage was quickly put out, leaving her dumbfounded.

“I, erm... Thanks.”

“Oh, my name’s Emily! I’ve known Ren since we were kids.”

“Really?! Wow, uh, first I’ve heard of that!”

“We get to play together here in Summertide over vacation. Let’s have some fun!”

“Yeah. Sounds good, Emily.”



Finally, a smile returned to Akira's face.

"Psst, Akira, are you and Ren going steady?" Emily went for a fastball right off the bat, with her American way of communicating.

"What?! N-No!" Akira shouted, shaking her head vigorously. "We're not like that!"

"Aah, okay. Well, don't get mad at him, then. It's not like he did anything bad."

"Oh... Ahahaha! Yeah, you're right. Sorry, Ren."

"Uh, sure?"

Then, Emily said, "I'm gonna go ahead and leave now. My family's waiting."

You're leaving now even though things are super awkward?!

"See you tomorrow, big guy. You should join us, Akira!"

"Erm, sure thing. See ya."

"Okay... Goodbye, Emily."

"Oh, and Ren?" Emily added, turning toward me one last time. "Don't tell anybody about you-know-what, okay? I don't want anyone finding out yet."

As for what she was referring to, it had to do with her private life. She had told me about it in a letter, but if she didn't want it to spread, then I wouldn't say a word.

"Yeah, gotcha."

"Cool, thanks! Night, you two!"

With a smile, Emily left the cottage.

So, err... What are we supposed to do now?

"Uh... Emily's American, so she gets pretty touchy-feely. I'm pretty sure she doesn't mean anything by it."

"Oh, okay, sure. But wow, this place is big!" She grinned, taking a good look around. "Even bigger than the guild house! We should thank Kokoru."

Phew! What a relief. Who knows what would've happened if that dark aura came back...

"Yep. We can use it all summer long, so let's make it our base while we grind in the dungeon!"

"Huh? What dungeon?"

"Oh, yeah, I didn't write it in the message. Here, take a look at this!"

I showed Akira the Aswarth's Undersea Ruins flyer that Kataoka had brought in.

"Hmm, lemme see... Exchangeable items for Aswarth's Undersea Ruins? Wow, that Rainbow Guard is crazy! More defense for every level, a free talent slot, *and* you get to change its appearance?"

"Yeah, it's good as heck! They only have ten of them, and I want to get us one. It's an essential item for you, I'd say."

"Huh? Why me?"

"With this, you could wear normal gear even as a sword dancer, yeah? Once the outfit problem is solved, there won't be any danger of you dropping out because of the parental supervision stuff!"

"Oh, wow. You were doing all this for me?"

"Well, it's mostly just for fun. I had Emily help me while you were out, so I figured we might as well get as deep as we could!"

"Ooh, am I ascending to queen status now? Yay! I get items without putting in any effort!"

"Uh, no. Come back and help us as soon as possible. Without you, I can't unleash my true potential."

"I know. You gotta have a sword dancer, right? Nozomi's gonna be with me tomorrow, so she can't help either."

"Well, it's probably fine. We're not having too much trouble at the moment. By the way, how's your gramps doing?"

"He's okay! A little bored, he says, but it'll be a good break for him."

“That so? I’m glad to hear he’s doing well.”

“Thanks. Oh, yeah! Could we go for a little walk? If you’ve been in the dungeon, then you haven’t explored the area much, right? This pamphlet says there’s a lot of stuff around!”

Akira revealed a Summertide pamphlet—the same one we’d received—with sparkles in her eyes. She must’ve gotten it from one of those NPC girls, same as us.

“Mm, true. Are you sure you don’t wanna go to bed, though? I know you’ll be busy tomorrow.”

“It’s cool! I can’t game much right now because of my family stuff, so I wanna enjoy it while I can!”

“Okay, well, where do you wanna go? The amusement park, maybe? Kataoka said they had festival stalls there.”

“Ooh! The pamphlet says so too! Yeah, let’s go. I’ve never been to a festival in my whole life, so I’ve always wanted to go to one.”

Makes sense. Akira, as a member of such a high-brow family, would never be allowed to go to commoner events like those.

“In that case...”

I do believe there were yukatas in the girls’ walk-in closet!

Chapter 4: Minigames with the Yukata Girls

“Ta-daaa! What d’you think? Do I look good, or what?”

Akira exited the walk-in closet with a big smile on her face. She had changed out of her uniform and into one of the yukatas.

Ooh, now this is a great view. I’m glad I suggested it to her.

“Very cute, plain and simple!”

“Chirp! Akira pretty, Akira pretty!”

Draco was into it too. The pattern and everything certainly looked lovely.

“Thanks! You’re looking good too, Ren.”

“You think so? Thank you, ma’am.”

There were men’s yukatas, as well, so I’d changed to match her.

“Game or not, I haven’t worn a yukata in a good while.”

“I feel you there. Summer’s all about staying inside gaming, right?”

“Darn straight! Having off from school makes raiding and experimenting way easier.”

“Yep. Thinking back, we spent all of last summer... and the summer before that... *and* the summer before that gaming together.”

“Yeah! Wasn’t middle school the best?”

“Ahem. Did you, uh, play with Emily back in elementary school?”

“Until fourth grade, yeah. After that year, she went home to America.”

“I see. And did you have fun?”

“Yeah, duh! Why— Ouch!”

Something crushed my foot!

“Oops, sorry. It’s so hard to walk in geta sandals.”

Akira's expression was mischievous, but I was starting to feel that dark aura rising up again.

"Uhh... Nah, it's cool. No problem. Anyway, let's get going."

"Sure. This yukata's actually good gear too!"

"Oh? Yours too?"

Our yukatas had garbage defenses but came with great special effects. Mine was as follows:

Pricey Yukata (M)

Type: Armor

Level: 1

DEF: 1

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: Max HP +100 and automatic HP recovery (10 HP/sec).

"It comes with HP regen for some reason."

"Huh, yours is HP?" Akira asked. "Mine's MP."

"Wha?! Do men's and women's have different effects?"

"Yeah, see? Look."

Pricey Yukata (F)

Type: Armor

Level: 1

DEF: 1

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: Max MP +50 and automatic MP recovery (5 MP/sec).

“No kidding.”

“As long as you don’t get hit, this is pretty good MP recovery.”

“Yeah, I’d say so. Shame we can’t leave Summertide with it.”

“Aww, we can’t? Maybe that’s why it’s so good. Not that I use MP, though.”

Sword dancers’ moves, including healing dances, all relied on their AP.

Hey, wait a second. If she has a pointless MP overflow, isn’t she the perfect target for my Elemental Circle?! As long as she isn’t targeted by enemies, it won’t matter if she has weak defenses! We might’ve just found something incredible!

I get it now! Elemental Circle is meant for supporting girls in yukatas!

“Actually, this might be really good *because* you don’t use MP. Gah, I really wanna experiment! Are there any monsters around?!”

“Whaaat?! No, I wanna check out the festival first!”

“Aah, fine. But if we find any on the way, I wanna try it! Just a little!”

“Sure, I guess. Can we go now?”

With that, we left the ocean cottage—and bumped into two visitors.

“Oh, hey, it’s Takashiro and Akki! Hiii!”

“We saw your message and came to check on you.”

It was Yano and Maeda. *They must have been intrigued by the message too.*

“Hi, Kotomi! Hey, Yuuna!”

“Feast your eyes on this, girls. This is the VIP room that Kokoru won for us!”

“Wow, cool! We can use this all summer too?”

“We’ll have to thank him for that. It’s just lovely!”

“Doubt we’d ever get to come to a place like this IRL. But now that we’re here, I’m gonna kick back and enjoy it to the fullest!”

The cottage’s location seemed to capture the girls’ interest, as Maeda and

Yano were more fired up than ever.

“Check this out too!” Akira chirped, spinning around in her yukata. “The cottage is full of these.”

“Ooh, sick!”

“It’s very cute.”

“They’re having a festival in the middle of the island. You two should get changed and come with us!”

“Sounds good. I’ll go!”

“Yes, of course. Let’s hurry and get changed.”

We waited for a moment, and then two more yukata-clad girls joined the party! They were all so gorgeous; I was once again reminded that our guild was full of cute girls.

I grinned. “Awesome. Ready to go, gals?”

“Yeah!”

We grabbed a Gryphon Taxi and headed to the venue. Upon our arrival, we saw that the area was like a shrine, but with stalls lining the road. It was a very standard Japanese festival, but it would be a fresh experience for all the foreign attendees like Emily. I wondered if this event was made so they could really soak up Japanese culture.

“Wow! My first festival... I’m so excited!”

Meanwhile, one natural-born Japanese girl among us was ridiculously hyped! Akira’s eyes were shining like the sun, and she was running all around between the stalls.

“Hahaha... Akki’s sure having fun.”

“Yeah, she says she’s never been to a festival.”

“Having no freedom must be a tad grating on the nerves.”

“Hey, everyone, look!” Akira waved to us from in front of a cotton candy vendor. “Let’s get some!”

Playing along, we all got some cotton candy to eat.

“Ooohhhh!”

From a nearby stall, we heard some strangely excited voices. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be some sort of shooting gallery... but different. Instead of a normal shooting gallery, it was more of an FPS arcade machine. Throngs of people had gathered around it, and a little old man NPC was yelling to everyone.

“Come one, come all! Step right up and take a gander! Today’s score to beat is fifty thousand points! Anyone who hits it gets a free Warp Stone! Score a hundred thousand, and you get a Special Warp Stone!”

“Whaaat?!”

Those were items used to enter Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins. Normal Warp Stones were 50,000 Mira! I was baffled. That meant this festival was no festival at all—it was actually a set of minigames to farm Warp Stones! As I took another look around, I saw that multiple stands here were blazing with gamer spirit.

Well, now I just have to get in on the action!

“Ooh! Girls, let’s do that! I wanna get Warp Stones!”

I pointed at the FPS machine disguised as a shooting game stall.

“Ren, what’s a Warp Stone?”

“We dunno either, since we just got here.”

“Right. The people over there seem rather... enthusiastic.”

“Aah, so Warp Stones are basically...”

I explained what I knew about Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins, Rainbow Guard, and about the Warp Stones we needed to enter the dungeon. If this could be a stable source of Warp Stones, then the problem of “how do we secure funds to keep going into the dungeon” would be solved. Frankly, if we kept up the five-runs-a-day pace, we would be bankrupt long before the end of summer vacation.

This is great! Not only do I get to see my girls in yukatas, but we've found a Warp Stone supply as an added bonus! Good thing we came.

"Sounds fun. I'll go get us some Warp Stones!"

"You sound confident, Yuuna."

"I always fight with a gun, anyway!"

Yano had a point there; her main weapon in this game *was* a gun. If anyone could do it, she could.

"Shooting, huh?" Akira said uneasily. "I'm not super confident in my skills. How about you, Ren?"

"Eh, maybe a little."

"I'm not especially used to guns either. Though I am confident in my racing skills."

"After this, we can see if they have any racing games."

"Ooh. I wanna find a fighting game stand, then! I'll kick some serious butt!"

"Okay, here goes. Old guy, lemme at 'em!"

"Hello, miss! You only get one try a day, so make sure you aim well!"

Only once a day? Hmm, fair enough. If you got unlimited tries, then you could just get all the Warp Stones you wanted. Are the other games like that too?

It felt like UW was saying, *Don't think it'll be that easy.* Still, the NPC didn't ask for any money, so one free attempt per day seemed reasonable.

He handed over the rifle-shaped controller, which resembled an old popgun. Instead of a target, the game's screen turned on to signal the start of the game. Pretty standard shooting game, like you'd find if you went out to an arcade.

A fantasy world like UW was displayed as the backdrop. An evil necromancer appeared and created massive quantities of zombies, and it was up to the player to mow them all down with their gun. A fantasy zombie flick sort of thing, you could say.

Anyway, Yano was doing a good job of shooting down zombies. There were a lot of enemies, but she didn't miss a single one. Not bad!

“Wow, Yuuna. You’re really good!”

“Heh! Ever since I started using a gun here, I’ve kinda started to like them. Now I play shooting games at home!”

Oh, I see. While I was at home analyzing data, Yano was diving into shooting games. I think she’s been working on new designs for Libra’s Brush too.

As she progressed, Yano’s score continued to pile up until she had nearly hit 50,000!

“Yano, you’re almost at fifty grand!”

“Gotcha!”

Suddenly, an old man who looked to be a boss appeared on-screen and yelled in anger. Then, the game screen spread even wider.

Oh, so that’s what they’re doing!

When the screen got bigger in shooting games, that meant loads more enemies were coming. No doubt it would interrupt Yano’s insane pace.

“Whoa, whoa! That’s a lot!”

The huge quantity of zombies pushed her back, cutting down her life bar! They were really out for blood now.

“Wagh! Aww, I died! What was my score?!”

Upon Yano’s tragic defeat, she yelled in irritation.

“Aww, what a shame, miss! Your score was 46,000!”

“Dang it! This sucks! Grrrr!”

“Worry not, for I will avenge you! I memorized their positioning.”

“Ooh. Good luck, Ren!”

I tried my hand at the machine, and made it to the part where Yano had died. Once again, the screen widened and enemies started flooding in. Everything was going smoothly!

“Now you gotta watch out!”

“No prob. I saw how yours went, but I’m gonna hit fifty k!”

However...



“Whoa, what? Their spawn patterns are different!”

The enemies’ spawn patterns, made more intense with the stage difficulty increase, were different from Yano’s run.

Mmgh. They aren’t half bad! Getting 50,000 will be harder than I expected!

There was no telling how many different patterns there were, but getting to 100,000 seemed outright impossible without really turning my analysis skills up to eleven. Still, I somehow managed to persevere. My score went up past 70,000, then 80,000, and finally the boss appeared on-screen again.

Then, the screen grew even *wider*!

“Man, it got bigger again!”

It proved to be too much even for me. Before long, I died.

“Ooh. Good job, little buddy! Your score was 82,000! Here’s your Warp Stone!”

“Thanks!”

I wanted to hit 100,000, but hey, I got a Warp Stone. Good enough!

“Nice going, Ren!” Akira cheered.

“Aww, I lost,” Yano complained. “That sucks! Here I thought I was pretty good too.”

“Well, I *did* get to watch you play first. That helped me memorize most of it. Really wish I’d hit a hundred thousand, though.”

“Hey, everyone, look over there!” Maeda’s eyes were shining; she seemed to have found something exciting.

“Oh, a racing game!”

“Now it’s my turn, right? Let’s do that next!”

Will Maeda be the one who wins us a Special Warp Stone?!

Much like the shooting-game stand, the racing-game stand was very popular. It was surrounded by people. There were several individual consoles set up, just like you’d see in a regular arcade. Their screens were way larger than normal,

though, making them pretty intimidating. From what I could see, this was one of those games where you raced through cities littered with tons of obstacles.

This stand also had a little old man NPC who was calling out to the players. “Today’s goal is to hit the finish line within three minutes for a Warp Stone, or two and a half minutes for a Special Warp Stone!”

Yep, just like I thought. They all give out Warp Stones!

“Then I shall take the wheel!”

“Oh, wait, Maeda. How about I go first, as a sort of recon? Learn from what you see and go for a Special Warp Stone!”

If I went first and she watched, then she ought to be able to go for the gold.

“Hmm, I see. Very well.”

“Nice. I’ll go first, my good man. Lemme at ’em!”

“Hm? Well, little buddy, you’ve already gotten a Warp Stone today, so you won’t win any rewards. Do you still want to play?”

“Huh? Really? So it’s one Warp Stone a day across *all* games.”

I’d thought we might be able to get more from different games, but the answer was no. I was just going to give Maeda a preview, though, so that was fine.

“No prob. I still wanna play!”

“But of course!”

I was about to go ham on this dumb office park! While evading other vehicles, signs falling from the sky, shattered glass, and more, I headed for the gold.

“Your clear time is two minutes, fifty seconds!” the NPC announced. “I can’t give you a Warp Stone, but well done!”

Impressed, Akira raised a brow. “Wow, Ren. You could get a Warp Stone in any game you want.”

“I’d prefer a Special Warp Stone, but maybe Maeda can get us one today!”

“Yes, leave it to me! I will not let your sacrifice be in vain!”

“Kotomi, that’s what you say to dead people. He’s kinda not dead.”

“Haha, I just wanted to say it once!”

Maeda was clearly feeling in her element. She normally never made such silly jokes.

“Hello, good sir. I would like to play next!”

“Yes, ma’am. Good luck! Ready, set... Go!”

Thus, Maeda began her race.

“Oh! The stage is different.”

“Dang, they changed it?!”

This time, the stage was something straight out of Kyoto, with shrines and temples lining the streets. The cherry blossoms raining down were pretty, but they only served to block her vision, increasing the difficulty of the track.

“What?! This one looks a lot harder!” Akira shouted.

Yano groaned. “Aargh, what bad luck!”

“It’s okay. This isn’t as fast as the airship on nitro, so I can keep up with ease! Besides, I can get more into it on the first attempt.”

“So my scouting was pointless... But damn, you’re good!”

“Wow! You go, girl!”

“I’ve never seen a car move like that! You’re killin’ it, Kotomi!”

With obviously greater speed, Maeda rushed through the stage. Her result?

“Your time is one minute and fifty-five seconds! I’ve never seen someone get under two minutes! Congratulations! Here’s your Special Warp Stone.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Nice, nice! Good stuff, Maeda.”

“Kotomi’s the best there is!” Akira cheered.

Yano gave her a pat on the back. “Nice work!”

Everyone watching broke out into applause. Having received her Special Warp

Stone, Maeda puffed up with pride.

“A warning for you, though. Once you’ve won a Special Warp Stone, you won’t get any more from this game. Tomorrow, that time’s just going to earn you a normal Warp Stone.”

Aww, dang it!

I’d been hoping Maeda would be able to farm us some Special Warp Stones. In that case, we would have to save this one for when we really needed it. Still, a guaranteed Warp Stone a day from Maeda was good enough. With her skill, I doubted she would fail to get it at any point.

Now that we’d conquered the racing game with ease, we searched for a stand to suit Akira’s taste.

“Guess I’m up next, huh? Let’s find a fighting game!”

After some walking, we arrived at a stand that looked to fit the bill.

“This is... kind of a fighting game, I guess?”

There was one large monitor with two stands modeled after the red and blue corners of a ring. The stands had no controllers, but they seemed to trace the motions of players standing on them. You would stand and move as if you were fighting, and the robots on-screen would mimic your punches and kicks. To put it in anime terms, it was like the Mobile Trace System!

It was a large-scale game, but it only had one set of stands to fight on. There, while two players duked it out, the audience cheered with excitement.

“Ooh, robot fighting!” Akira cried, eyes aglitter. “That looks fun!”

“Wanna try it?” I asked her. “It tracks your movement, so it might be a little different from the kind of fighting games you normally play.”

“I actually know some real-life self-defense moves. I think I can do it!”

Judging by how the fight currently in progress is going... Oh! They just finished.

The announcer’s voice echoed through the area. “And it’s oveeeeeer! A crushing defeat, with the victor hale and hearty at half HP! Now, with your four-win streak, you’re close to getting a Special Warp Stone!”

That sounded like a young lady. What, no little old guy here? They also sounded oddly familiar. The thought prompted me to take a quick gander at her. *Oh, it's Ms. Nakada! She's even announcing here?!*

"Now, who dares take up the challenge next?! If you win once in this PvP arena, you'll get a Warp Stone! Earn a five-win streak, and the Special Warp Stone is yours! If you get *ten* wins in a row, then bam, it's a Super Special Warp Stone! This is the only game to get your SSWS! That lovely lady over here is currently on a nine-win streak!"

The winner indicated was a woman in her early twenties, about the same age as Ms. Nakada. With her shoulder-length black hair, I would've described her as an archetypally Japanese beauty. Her face radiated youth, but her aura was much more mature. As a result, she looked to be older.

Considering her age, she was likely not an academy student but rather someone logging in to Summertide from overseas. Maybe she was a gamer who just wanted to check out the VRMMO?

This place was full to bursting with hardcore gamers, so it was incredible that she could pull off nine wins. Though, as this game used something like the Mobile Trace System, I felt like it wouldn't really test fighting-game skills, but real-life fighting skills instead.

Either way, nobody stepped up to the challenge despite Ms. Nakada's provocations. One win would get you a Warp Stone, so it was natural that they wanted to wait for an enemy they thought they could beat. The woman on her nine-win streak could've trounced any of us, so it was best to just hang back until someone weaker came along.

But among us, there was one who was glad to raise her hand! Someone right next to me, in fact!

"Ooh, ooh! Pick me! I wanna do it!"

"What? Hey, you know she's really strong, right?! You sure about this, Akira?"

"Heheheh. If I had to express my feelings with one cool line... 'I'll find a better challenge!' No, wait! Maybe... 'Ally to good! Nightmare to you!'"

"That was two lines! Which one is it?!"

That's Akira, though. She's really good at fighting games, so I can see why she's so confident.

Just then, Ms. Nakada noticed Akira wiggling around with her hand up. “Oh, if it isn't Aoyagi! Hmm, what to do? I could turn her down by my own discretion.”

She then turned to the reigning champ, whose character name was Shizuku. Ms. Nakada wrung her hands together obsequiously as she spoke to her.

This lady must have been a big deal. Was she like a sponsor of the school, or some sort of VIP? As Summertide was open to a larger audience, it wouldn't be a huge surprise if someone like that came to play.

“I don't see why not,” said Shizuku. “Let us give her a fight. Come, young girl, up to the stage!”

The way she spoke was intimidating and somewhat masculine, which clashed with her pretty, youthful countenance. Still, this *was* a game, after all, so the latter had probably been assembled during character creation. There was no need to stay true to your real-life appearance when you could look however you wanted.

For example, Akabane's brother was using the gaming world to indulge in his fetish 120%. Frankly, going that far tended to make people cringe, but partaking in such abnormalities could be fun in its own way. It was kinda like role-playing. Kataoka's follower schtick fell under that category too—even if that was cringey enough in itself.

“Okay! Here I come.” Akira happily ran up to the stage.

Shizuku let out a deep chuckle as she approached. “You're clearly enjoying yourself. Fond of the academy and its game world, are you?”

“Well, yeah!” Akira responded with a big smile.

“Hmm, good. But do not expect me to hold back against you.”

“Of course! But I'm gonna win, y'know!”

“Ready, you two?” Ms. Nakada asked. “Prepare for battle!”

The two combatants stood on their platforms and assumed fighting stances. I didn't know if it was just my imagination, but their movements looked oddly

alike.

“Three, two, one... and begin!”

Reacting to Ms. Nakada’s call, the two controlled robots began punching at each other. From there, an intense back-and-forth battle began. Shizuku was strong, but Akira held on just fine.

As far as I could see, Shizuku was winning in terms of skill, variety, and raw talent. But Akira’s reaction time was better, along with her defensive tactics. Put simply, Shizuku won in offense, while Akira won in defense.

The match proceeded with their HP falling at about equal rates. Everyone watching was growing more and more hyped up. Our surroundings were ruled by fervor like you’d see at a real martial arts match.

But then, the end came into sight.

“Haaaah!”

Finally, the whirling fists of Shizuku’s robot broke through Akira’s guard, knocking off the last of her HP. Shizuku’s HP was left at about 10%, so it really had been a close match.

“The battle is over! Shizuku’s ten-win streak has earned her a Super Special Warp Stone!”

The crowd went wild.

Akira trudged back to us, looking dejected. “Aww, man. Sorry, everyone.”

“Dang, that was close. Good fight, though!”

“Yes! It was very satisfying to see you fight.”

“It’s cool, Akki! Don’t worry about it.”

“You can get us that Super Special Warp Stone next time! I’m gonna get one for us, myself.”

“Okay. Ugh, I really wanted to win, though.”

Meanwhile, Shizuku was walking toward us. “Don’t be so frustrated, now. I’ll gladly fight you anytime. You may have this, if you promise to get a hold of yourself.”

With that, she handed the Super Special Warp Stone right over to Akira.

“Whaaaat?! I-I can’t take something this valuable from you!”

“Hmm, but I don’t know what to do with it. I assumed you might be able to make some use of the thing.”

“B-But...” Akira looked unsure of what to do.

An idea was bubbling up in my brain, so I cleared my throat and said, “Excuse me. How would you like to form a party with us to see just how fun and useful it can be?”

If she didn’t want to use it, we should all share it!

Interlude: Thinking with Her Heart

The next day...

“Haaaah.”

In the dazzling party venue, all I could do was yawn. We’d all stayed up really late last night, so coming to this party so early in the morning had me feeling groggy. Today, politicians and businessmen had brought along their children who had yet to enter the wider world. It was only obvious that I’d have to attend. My family was always telling me that this was like our job.

My grandpa, who was supposed to have come with me, was still in the hospital due to his injury. That meant I had to pull his weight too.

“It’s uncouth to yawn so openly, Akira.”

“Oh, Nozomi. Sorry, I’ll be more careful.”

For the next four days, I had to go to these dumb “socialite” parties. But since Nozomi was going to be with me the whole time, things were a little easier.

“Drink this. It will help you wake up.”

Nozomi handed me a glass of iced coffee. I took a sip, but it was awfully bitter. I couldn’t help but frown a little.

“What’s the matter? Are you too tired?”

“Erm, no, I’m fine.”

Last night, after visiting my grandpa, I had ended up gaming way more than I meant to. That was why I was so tired. Wearing a yukata and hopping between stalls at the festival had been fun and all, but something else was weighing heavily on my mind.

Ren and the others were planning to take Shizuku to Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins, along with the Super Special Warp Stone she’d given us. Emily would be with them too, no doubt. She and Ren had looked so *friendly* with each other in the floating cottage. Maybe that was just how childhood friends were, but it still

didn't feel good.

Afterward, Emily had rushed home and Kotomi and Yuuna had shown up, so we'd all gone to the festival together. I'd kept up a smile all the while, but... if it had ended up being just the three of us, what kind of face would I have made? Even I wasn't sure.

Seriously, nobody warned me that a childhood friend character would show up at the eleventh hour. That's not fair! I figured Ren wasn't showing much interest in her because he was so focused on gaming, but what if I'm wrong, and he really does like Emily?

I shook my head vigorously, chasing the bad thoughts out of my head. Yet no matter how hard I tried to banish it, the mental image kept crawling back. I was seriously starting to lose my mind.

It especially made me wonder if I should really be here attending some stupid party right now. While I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, I knew I had to do *something*.

Suddenly, an ice-cold sensation pricked the back of my neck. It was the drink Nozomi had in her hands.

"Eep!"

"Tell me what happened. I-I am still your, um, friend, after all."

"Huh? Well, uh, it's kinda not something I'd enjoy talking about, and I'm not sure how you could—"

"Just hurry up and say it! I want to advise you!" she demanded, her tone desperate.

I wasn't sure how to fix the problem myself, so maybe talking to her was the best choice after all.

Once I had explained the situation, she remarked, "Oh, a childhood friend. I see. I'm surprised Takashiro has such a friend."

"Yeah. It bothers me so much. Like, what if they keep getting all cozy with each other while I'm not there? I hate that I feel this way, though."

"I think it's natural. Anyone would feel sour if they thought the person they

loved was being taken away from them.”

“Yeah, but I shouldn’t bring my dumb feelings into it since he’s just trying to have fun gaming.”

“Oh, what are you talking about, dear? That’s just who you are; you think with your heart rather than your head.”

“What?! N-No, that’s not me at all!”

“Really now? *You’re* the one who suggested that Takashiro come to Yosei Academy, no? You did that because you wanted him to realize that you were a girl instead of the boy he thought you were. Am I wrong?”

“Not entirely, I guess. But I did want to play games with him more too. I just wanted to have fun living life. I didn’t intend to—”

“That may have been what you thought. But Emily’s appearance has exposed the fact that your conscience perhaps isn’t as clean as you thought.”

“Huh?!”

“If all you wanted was to play games with him, then why should his having a girlfriend affect your enjoyment?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah, you might be right.”

“Accept the fact that your heart guides your actions. To make any change, it’s vital that you first know yourself.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

Is it true? Am I really like that? I guess it would seem that way to anyone watching. Urgh, but this is way too embarrassing to admit!

“Now, as an initial countermeasure, I will act to ensure that nothing fishy happens between Takashiro and Emily.”

“You’d do that for me?!”

“Yes, of course. You can relax.” Nozomi was unusually confident.

“Um, thank you?”

“Still, I can’t cut the problem off at its root. Only you can do that.”

“Me? But how?”

“That should be obvious. All you need to do is begin a formal relationship with Takashiro. Act based on your emotions, as usual, and confess to him. I’ll back you up as necessary.”

“Huh?! What about all my annoying family stuff, though? I don’t want to bother Ren with all that...”

“None of that matters. What’s important is that you follow your heart. That’s what I learned at Yosei Academy. Too much self-restraint is bad for you, you know.”

“I don’t even know how Ren feels about me!”

“Then you’re okay with him dating Emily?”

“No, I’m not. But I’m fine with the way things are!”

“You may be in a situation where ‘do nothing’ isn’t an option. Your two choices are to push, or pull. Think hard on it.”

I could say nothing in response.



Chapter 5: Aswarth's Undersea Ruins, Part 2

In the alternate world of Summertide, at our floating VIP cottage, the swimsuit-clad Maeda was going wild on our fantasy-chic jet ski—with one similarly swimsuited Yano on board behind her.

“Ahahahaha! This is so fun!”

“Eek! Whoa, gal, easy now! Kotomi, please, slow dooown!”

“Not a chance! This isn't even maximum speed! We're going to draw out this little fellow's full power!”

“Nooo! Help meeeee!”

They bounced all over the water's surface, sending big splashes of water all over the place! Actually, they were bouncing really, really high. Then, Maeda did a tailspin in midair and stuck the landing. After that, they bounced even higher in a wild arc. Her reckless driving continued for some time.

Maeda was clearly having a lot of fun, but Yano was almost bawling.

Emily marveled at Maeda's driving skills. “Hoo boy! If she plays her cards right, she could go pretty far.”

She too had changed into a swimsuit and tried racing Maeda on jet skis, but she just couldn't keep up. Racing games weren't her domain, though, so she likely never had a chance.

As for me, I stood on the terrace where I could see all these cuties frolicking around in their swimsuits and focused entirely on my experimentation work!

“Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle!”

Draco watched me cast and called out the colors. “Chirp! Red, blue, green, yellow, blue!”

“Good. Thanks, Draco. That makes fire, ice, wind, earth, ice.”

I input the results into a spreadsheet on my laptop. This was pretty rudimentary, but I was casting a ton of Elemental Circles to measure the probability of each one activating. A handful of results could be influenced by luck, so I wanted at least a thousand pieces of data.

“Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle!”

“Green, dark blue, yellow, yellow, purple!”

“Hmm... Wind, water, earth, earth, lightning.”

At this pace, we would be at a thousand in no time! Rigorous experimentation was important. We had just gotten over about a hundred uses, but according to trends so far, there were eight possible affinities: fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, ice, light, and dark. Of these, fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, and ice were all about fifteen or sixteen percent likely. Light and dark were much rarer, showing up just two to five percent of the time.

Accordingly, the normal elemental circles merely added their respective elemental affinities to weapon attacks, like Akira’s Skyfall. The rarer dark circle bestowed a weapon affinity *and* absorbed HP. Any absorbed HP that went over the recipient’s maximum increased their max HP to match. In light’s case, it was the same but with MP. As those effects were more potent than those of the other elements, they appeared less often. Incidentally, the max HP or MP boost lasted about three minutes, but could reach up to double the user’s normal maximum.

Before coming here, I had done plenty of testing on my buddies, the Island Bunnies of the first stratum of Trinisty Isle! The details and durations of the effects were clear by now. From this point on, I would have to try changing weapons, casting locations, and amount of concurrent circles and see if it changed the percentages at all.

Was it entirely random, or were there conditions that would influence probabilities? I had to figure that out. The light and dark circles seemed pretty darn useful. If there was any way to use them more often, I definitely wanted to find it.

The dark circle especially drew me in. Increasing maximum HP meant making

the power of my ultimates even greater, as hidden weapon arts increased in damage based on how low your HP was compared to your maximum. By increasing the max, damage would increase accordingly. Same went for ultimates that included hidden weapon arts.

Accelerating the drama in the drama cannon—how dramatic can you get?! Truly, summer was the season of drama and romance!

“Next up! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle!”

“Chirp! Red, purple, dark blue, red, green!”

“Fire, lightning, water, fire, wind. Got more comin’ your way!”

“What in the world are you doing?” came a voice from behind me.

I turned to find Shizuku, whom we’d met at the robot fighting game yesterday. Ms. Nakada was with her; perhaps she’d shown Shizuku the way here. Now that she’d agreed to our proposition, Shizuku was popping by to visit. It was fine and all, since this was summer vacation, but didn’t she have work or something?

“Oh, heya, Shizuku. I’m just experimenting to find out the probabilities for this new magic. It can have a lot of different affinities.”

“Affinities?” she said as if unfamiliar with the term.

Ms. Nakada launched into an explanation. “Yes, so you see...”

This lady really must be a VIP, I thought.

“Hmm. So you’ve determined that they appear in an irregular pattern?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You’re practically using the scientific method. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Yeah! It’s really fun!”

“Is that so? Aren’t video games best with flashy fights and the like?”

“It depends on the person, don’t you think? I like those kinds of games too, but doing all of this thorough preparation makes it so I can show off in the flashiest way possible. I mean, I’m in a class that requires me to do that, or else

I can't help out at all."

"Oh?"

"Err, he's a bit of an odd one out," said Ms. Nakada. "He doesn't tire out on it, though, so maybe he's suited for laboratory work or analysis. He does have some of the best analytical abilities among all of our students."

"Ohoho, I see. Very well. As promised yesterday, I've taken the opportunity to come and visit you."

"Cool. Well, how about we head out now?" I turned toward Maeda and Yano, who were still playing around on the jet ski. "Hey, girls! Shizuku's here, so let's get going to Aswarth's!"

"Okay!"

Thus, we put our fun on hold and prepared to leave the cottage. Just as we did so, however...

"But wait, I say!"

You've gotta be kidding me! Is he here?!

"Not this guy!" I blurted.

I looked toward the roof of the cottage. There was a man wearing a full-face iron mask and a small, crimson scarf. Apart from that, he had a very small pair of swim briefs and a rose tattoo on his chest—the latter of which, unfortunately, had been my doing.

The darn perv looked down upon us from the roof, his arms crossed as always.

Ryuutarou Akabane (3-A)

Level 212 Sword Dancer

Guild: True Form (Guild Master)

Oh, god, there he is! He's rocking the perv look even here in Summertime!

People from outside the academy, along with foreign players, were

participating in the event. I'd really appreciate it if he didn't embarrass us Japanese players like this!

Yano cowered like she'd just found a cockroach in her house. "Aaargh! Kotomi, do something!"

Truly, she was not into Ryuutarou. Her reaction was super girly, but he disgusted girls and boys alike. He was a genuine freak.

"Come now, Yuuna, you know I can't stop him. Just, um, remember when you saw him clothed before. That should make it easier."

He *was* kinda hot, to be fair. Hot, rich, and already connected to corporations all over. Truly a powerful man... and truly a shame! Why had fate given him a penchant for exhibitionism alongside all those good features?

Guess that's what happens when those three things combine. He was too OP, so he had to be balanced.

"But wait, I say! There is no other me! My whole self stands before you! Nothing more, nothing less!"

With a twirl, he jumped down and landed in front of us.

"Ewwww!" Yano backed off at top speed.

Emily, on the other hand, found it hilarious. "Wooow, hahaha! That's funny! You're like the spitting image of a complete pervert!"

"Erm, a question," Shizuku began. "Is that the grandson of the Diet's Ryuugou Akabane, Ryuutarou?"

Ms. Nakada made an awkward expression. "Um... Yes. Yes, he is."

"He looks the part of a fool. As far as I can see, the Akabane family has a bleak future."

"No comment. They're a major sponsor of our school."

I really didn't want to be seen near this guy, but I asked Akabane's brother, "Um, do you need something?"

"Yes, indeed! My sister asked me to assist you dear younglings. You're short on man power, no?"

Uh, what? Why would Akabane know about any of that? We hadn't seen her in-game in a while. Oh, maybe Akira told her? She had to go to some parties and ceremonies and stuff on family business, but I think she said Akabane would be with her.

I didn't know the elites' world well myself, but two girls from families of similar status were likely made to appear in similar places. *That said, why'd she have to send this guy to help us?* Strength aside, I worried about his appearance and playstyle meshing with our party.

Maeda, Yano, Emily, Shizuku, and I made five. Parties had a limit of six people. Maybe we could get Ms. Nakada to help? I cast her a meaningful glance.

She immediately shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm only here to guide Shizuku. If I helped with your dungeon runs, it'd be favoritism. Besides, I'm going to a little mixer soon!"

"Aah. Guess you would have stuff to do."

"You know me. Gotta have a little fun over the summer, right?"

"Then you take no issue with me being your sixth?" Ryuutarou pressed.

"I-I didn't exactly say that, but..."

The drama cannon *did* have impeccable synergy with sword dancers. In a full party, I would always want at least one on hand. If we brought him along, our party would be as follows: symbologist (drama cannon build), scholar, sky pirate, armor knight, sword dancer, and—with Shizuku along—martial artist.

Out of this entire party, I would have the most trouble fighting scores of mobs. They weren't enough of a threat for me to unleash the cannon, but my supporting abilities weren't exactly great. Weakening mobs didn't do much, as they were *just* mobs. My party would appreciate buffing skills more, and they would be much more effective overall. But that was a story of the past now!

This was the perfect time to put the Elemental Circle to work! Consuming my target's MP was a bit of an issue, but as long as we remained in Summertide, we had the great and powerful yukata to save us! Ideally, the girls would wear yukatas and do what they could on offense, while a man took care of healing. That would be the most convenient way to make this work. After all, healers

were typically so busy with healing that they couldn't attack.

I guess he would fit the bill for us, after all...

"Okay. Yeah, if you'd please."

"Whaaat?! I'm too embarrassed to be seen with this guy!" Yano cried, desolate.

"Heheh. But wait, I say."

I didn't know what he wanted us to wait for, but he grinned. That weirdo really loved watching people squirm. As a pervert, seeing people cringe before him was the greatest pleasure.

"C'mon, Yano," I coaxed. "The dungeon's instanced, anyway, so nobody else is gonna see us there."

"Hmm. Then perhaps while we're in town, I shall tail you from afar!"

"Eww..." Yano still didn't like the idea.

"But wait, I say. How about this?" He activated his sword dancer skill, Vanishing Whirl, and disappeared.

That finally seemed good enough for her. "Ooh, maybe. Since, y'know, I can't see you."

Isn't an exhibitionist hiding by disappearing kind of... defeating the point, though? Maybe he should just put some clothes on? I mean, I guess I can appreciate it. What a... weird stroke of fortune?

"Then there we have it. Let's go!" Emily took my arm and started to walk.

"Emily, your chest is—"

Suddenly, something smacked into me and knocked me down on the spot.

"Ow, what was that?"

"But wait, I say. Sorry, I was practicing my newest dance and accidentally crashed into you. The motions are certainly intense."

What the heck is he doing while we can't see him? What a whackjob.



When we arrived at Aswarth's Undersea Ruins, we found it completely crowded. Clearly we weren't the only ones heading in for a dungeon run. It didn't seem as though anyone had obtained the Rainbow Guard yet. As for how I knew, there was a sheet on the item exchange counter that showed how many still remained in stock. The number was still ten, unchanged from the day before.

With the five-runs-a-day limit, I doubted anyone could've possibly gotten to the very bottom of the dungeon so quickly. Considering the difficulty, the item necessary to trade for the Rainbow Guard, called Galactic Rainbow, likely wouldn't be unearthed until later in the summer. Our vacation had only just begun.

Your humble servant offers up his summer unto you, Rainbow Guard!

Turning toward Shizuku, I explained, "We're about to enter a dungeon that changes shape each time you progress to the next floor. Clear conditions include killing all the monsters on a floor and other stuff like that. There are save points along the way, so if we save at them, we can start from there in future attempts. So each time, our main goal is finding the next save point as we progress."

"I see. An unpredictable adventure, then. How interesting."

"Since you don't seem too experienced in this particular game, well, you can just get used to it as you fight off mobs. All you really have to do is follow our lead."

"Understood. When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

"It's our first time too!" Yano said cheerily. "Takashiro and Emily, you take the lead."

Emily flashed a thumbs-up. "No prob! If things start looking hairy, just hide behind me, 'kay? I'll take aggro!"

"Oh, right. Maeda, Yano, Shizuku—can you three put on these yukatas I brought from the cottage?"

While they were recovering MP over time thanks to the yukatas, we could expect a pure increase in attack power using my Elemental Circle. The only

problem was that the yukatas only gave 1 DEF, so giving it to our main tank Emily this time would be seriously bad.

Conversely, while Emily was on tank duty, they could fight with the yukatas equipped as long as they didn't steal aggro. Finally, I could put in some work as a back-line supporter!

This magic relied on the power of the limited-time yukata gear, though, so once we returned to our world, it would turn back into a lame "for fun" spell that took away all of my allies' MP. Symbologist was gonna shine in a way it only could here in the world of Summertide! I would savor that joy as a memory of a summer gone!

I'd already explained how my Elemental Circle worked, so Maeda and the other girls changed without a fuss. Shizuku still didn't quite have the hang of the system menu, so Emily taught her how to use it while she changed.

"Lucky. I wish I could fight in a yukata."

"Sorry, Emily. You're tanking, so we can't afford to put you in one."

"Aww. You don't wanna see me in a yukata, Ren?"

"I just did, though." I had seen her dancing around in one before we left the cottage.

She sure was cute. It's nice to see foreign girls wearing yukatas.

"Ahem! But wait, I say. We should get right to it, should we not? I'll reappear soon."

"Err, you know you can wear a yukata inside, right?"

They only came with 1 DEF, but that was still one more than going in naked.

"Hmph. I appreciate the thought."

Guess that's a no, huh?

"Now, off we go! Using a Super Special Warp Stone right off the bat feels like a waste, so let's start with a normal one!" I tossed a normal Warp Stone into the maw of the familiar girlish lion's head.

"Thankies! Where d'you wanna start? Your current save point is at B6F!"

“Then let’s start there!”

“Okaaay! Have a great time! Make way for the guests!”

The world before my eyes warped and distorted. We started on B6F. What would it be like? When we warped in, a system message came in right away!

Gate Condition: Defeat the giant monster!

“Giant monster?”

“That’s a new one,” Emily said as we exchanged glances.

Yesterday, we’d started off by dying to a monster house. After that, every other floor had asked us to eliminate the monsters within.

“But wait, I say. I believe there may be an abnormally large monster on this floor. In short, we should defeat that.”

“Guess so.”

From our current position, we saw a few monsters, but they were all normal size. *Maybe we ought to check somewhere else?*

“This way, then!” I shouted.

With Emily and me leading the pack, we left the save-point room. After going along the path for a while, we found another room. Inside was something that *really* stood out.

“Oh. That was quick.”

Emily laughed. “Ahahaha! How obvious can you get?”

It was a massive treasure chest, ten times bigger than normal. It was so huge that we had to look up at it. Seeing as this floor’s clear condition was to defeat a giant monster, that meant that this was a gigantified Mimic. Like Emily said, it was obvious.

“Let’s just kick things off, then!” Emily approached the treasure chest and put a hand on it.

“Reeeee!”

The giant Mimic leapt into action, excited to find that someone had fallen for its ruse. *Did you really think we didn't know, man?!*

Emily activated Provoke immediately after it started moving, pulling aggro to herself for good. Now it was time for us to attack.

“Elemental Circle!”

As usual, I targeted Draco with it. By setting the circle on him, I could move it at will.

Faithfully, Draco reported, “Chirp! Green!”

I supposed it was a habit for him by now. What a good boy. He was always doing what I asked of him. Indeed, the circle was green. So it was wind attribute. At the very least, this probably wouldn't heal the Mimic. If the thing were a wind monster, then it would likely heal.

“Draco, follow me!”

With Draco in tow, I went next to the Mimic. It was facing Emily, so I circled around to its back, adjusting my position so that Emily wouldn't be in the circle.

“Maeda, Yano, Shizuku! Come over here and attack from inside the circle!” I called out, swinging my covered Canesword.

My attacks missed due to my abysmal DEX, but the extra wind damage from my enchantment was hitting it. Shock waves, much like the ones from Akira's Skyfall, erupted from my staff.

“Ooh, this is awesome!”

Shock waves rode on the stabs of Yano's bayonet, as well. She thrust her gun forward to pierce, lifted it up and smacked our foe with the handle, then followed up with a kick. Incidentally, Yano had used her Merit Points to get a Master's Scroll (Kicks), helping to patch up her point-blank fighting ability. Clearly she had been inspired by Yukino's hybrid style of kicking and dual-wielding. She'd been so excited over having just barely secured enough points from our last exam for the scroll.

With each kick, her bare legs peeked out of her yukata, making for a pretty enticing sight.

Shock waves followed every single attack, grinding down the Mimic's health. Its gigantification meant it had a much higher HP bar than normal, but it wasn't much of a problem.

"It's fun to attack head-on once in a while," Maeda said, swinging her staff around.

She was able to use offensive magic, so just by wearing the yukata, she was able to attack all she wanted without consuming much MP.

But when I think about it that way, I guess the yukata's the thing that stands out, rather than the Elemental Circle.

Circle or not, having the yukata on greatly increased the amount of MP at Maeda's disposal. This increased both the amount of damage she could deal and the amount of healing she could offer. Truly, the yukata was all-powerful. Incredible in both form and function!

Meanwhile, Shizuku threw a few attacks of her own at the Mimic, as if measuring how it felt. "Hmm? Ohohoho! So *that's* how you move! It's not quite what I expected!"

With each strike of her fists, shock wave after shock wave smacked the Mimic. Same with her kicks, grapples, and strikes. Grapples, of course, fell into the "throws" category. You'd have to wonder what part of a Mimic you could "grapple," but when she jumped up to the lid of the chest and squeezed, sure enough, she debuffed it.

Wait a second. Is she using every single one of the martial artist's moves?!

Shizuku's martial artist class came with four potential types of motions: punches, kicks, throws, and striking techniques. To start, people could pick two of them to specialize in. Yes, *two*.

Does that mean she has the other two equipped as talents? She's like a master of martial arts!

Shizuku then unleashed a ball of energy from her hands. "Haaaah!"

Oh, of course. When martial artists have all four motions set, they can use chi waves.

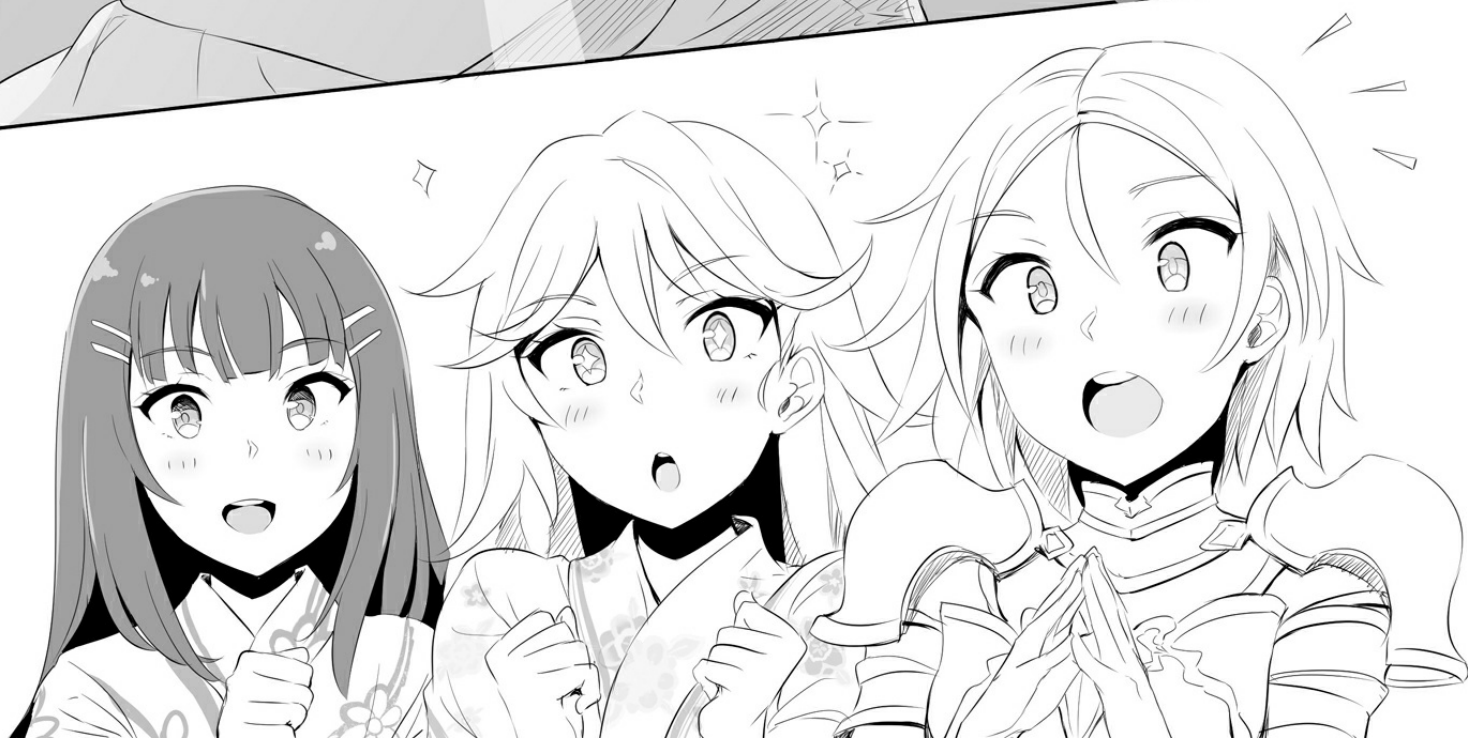
The animation for them looked exactly like the legendary attack from the anime *Dragon Orb*, so they should have been super popular. However, they were not. As for why, it was simple: the waves were weak. Waves of energy were long-range attacks, but they were far weaker in power than gunshots or arrows.

Guns and bows consumed ammunition to attack, so it would have been pretty imbalanced for energy waves to consume nothing *and* be better. Thus, its strength was kept pretty low. Typically, it didn't come up except for when martial artists took screenshots of each other pretending to do anime attacks.

If someone wanted to equip both other martial artist talents just for chi waves, they might as well have just used one talent slot to be able to equip guns or bows. It was hard to call martial artist itself a crappy class, but unfortunately, energy waves in themselves were a useless ability.

“Oho! What’s this?! Hahaha, how neat!”

But Shizuku was clearly having fun pew-pewing energy waves around, and far be it from me to ruin someone’s fun. Likely due to the ranged nature of the waves, my Elemental Circle had no effect on her attacks. Pretty sad! Just normally attacking was better in every way.



“Wow!” Emily marveled. “It’s weak, but it’s straight out of that anime! Cool!”

“Yeah, it looks sweet!”

“Indubitably!”

Emily and the girls seemed to enjoy it.

“Hmm. Is that it?” Shizuku didn’t seem to catch on.

What, does she not know about Dragon Orb? It came from my dad’s generation, though. Maybe she’s younger than us? Or even older than my dad? I guess she could also be one of those people who doesn’t care about anime or gaming. Not that it matters, really. Just a little unexpected.

Meanwhile, the Mimic was taking a beating. It fell soon enough. Along with its big HP gain, its stats had been juiced about twenty or thirty percent. With six of us fighting it, though, the thing didn’t stand much of a chance.

It was nice that the Elemental Circle had helped out too. Actually providing support for my party for once felt so refreshing! Before, I was useless when it came to fighting regular mobs, and my drama cannon could only be used in very limited circumstances.

“Nice, now we can go to the next one. Let’s gooo!”

We rushed to the B7F gate.



From there, we cleared B7F, B8F, and B9F with no particular issues. Now, we were on B10F. If we cleared this one too, would we find a save point? There should have been a save point each five floors, but B10F looked different from the rest.

This floor was a huge stadium of sorts. Walls surrounded us, with empty spectators’ stands lined up all around up above. It was kind of like the arena at Yukino’s guild, but there were no signs of life; it felt oddly lonely.

Right away, a *ping!* came to our attention.

Gate Condition: Defeat the boss monster!

Ooh?! Another new one!

Directly across from us, an iron gate made a grinding noise as it slowly rose. Within, a giant, suspiciously boss-sized silhouette was visible. Shrill, metallic grinding noises echoed through the room. Once the creature came into view, the reason for this sound became obvious. Its lower body was that of a monster, with scary-looking, thorned tank treads. When they spun, they made a grinding noise.

Level 105 Death Chariot

Crown Icon (rare monster)

Its face resembled a famously horrific, black-and-white screaming mask. It wielded a giant scythe, but its arms were bound together by a spiked chain. The robe enveloping its body had some sort of incantation written on it in blood, and the area around it was filled with terrifying effects that made it look like the monster was surrounded by vengeful spirits.

Meanwhile, its lower body was a tank with metal spikes all over it. From the hem of its robe, there were its treads and two dragon heads peeking out, the latter likely hauling the body of the vehicle. The dragons' mouths flickered with fire, like they were about to erupt.

This guy's design is insane!

It wasn't visible due to the robes, but I had to wonder how his upper and lower body were connected. If he was actually just riding it like a Legway or something, I'd laugh myself to death. I wanted to climb up and peek under the robe, but... eh, it'd probably be too dark to see anything.

"This boss is kinda punk! I like it!" Emily's eyes shone with admiration.

That was unsurprising; she had always liked weird abominations like him. Emily loved action games and the like where certain murderers in hockey masks were main characters.

“Punk? Eugh, it just looks gross to me. I don’t like it.”

“Agreed. I’d much prefer if it were cute, instead of ‘punk.’”

Yano and Maeda’s reactions were much more reserved. I expected as much, really.

“But wait, I say. What matters is not what’s on the outside, but what’s on the inside. I say we have nothing to fear.”

Ryuutarou’s response came off as kind and mature. But how could he, of all people, say such a thing?! His outside was so bad that you really had to wonder about the inside. With how ridiculous he looked, his claim wasn’t exactly persuasive.

Somebody, say something! Please! I don’t wanna talk to him! I’ve said it enough!

Clearly fed up to death with him, Shizuku commented, “I find myself unmoved when you don’t exactly look normal yourself. If Ryuugou saw you now, he would cry, Ryuutarou.”

“Urk... But wait, I say! I implore you to keep this between us! This all remains in the gaming world and is entirely unrelated to real life! A mere pastime! Please, have some discretion!”

Wow, was he really starting to panic? Maybe he’d realized that she knew his parents or whatever and that he was in danger. If he kept this up, I figured it was only a matter of time before they found out.

“Shizuku, who’s Ryuugou?”

“He’s this boy’s grandfather, a member of the Diet.”

“Heh. Yeah, I guess he would cry if he saw that.”

“Absolutely.”

Shizuku and I agreed.

“Everyone, he’s coming this way!”

Skree-ee! Skree-ee!

As the boss came screeching in on its treads, Emily activated Provoke and

took aggro. She definitely had a fast reaction time.

“Okay. Yano, Shizuku—just do what you did against the Mimic!” I ordered.
“Maeda, keep up support from the rear!”

“Gotcha, boss!”

“Very well!”

“Yes, sir!”

As for Ryuutarou, I didn’t have anything to say to him. Whether he was against a boss or mobs, his job remained the same. Naturally, being a sword dancer meant he was a healer. A while back, he’d claimed to be a progressive, a vegetarian, and a pacifist, but it seemed like he was really sticking to that, as he hadn’t attacked an enemy even once. He was ignoring the whole “sword” part of sword dancers, but if that was what he wanted, then that was fine with me.

Using a Master’s Scroll (Healing Magic), he made himself able to use recovery spells. Now, he had two avenues of healing at his disposal. With his talent Tactical Magic, consuming MP would cause him to accumulate AP. Meanwhile, Tactical Arts meant that consuming AP would cause him to accumulate MP, doing the exact opposite. Furthermore, Breath of Ares naturally replenished his AP over time, while Breath of Zeus recovered his MP.

Finally, he had equipped a bizarre magical-girl wand, which provided no offensive power but increased the efficiency of his Tactical Magic and Tactical Arts just by wielding it. I mean, he *could* try to attack with it, but sword dancers had such poor synergy with staves that his attacks would just miss.

To summarize, his talents were Master’s Scroll (Healing Magic), Tactical Magic, Tactical Arts, Breath of Ares, and Breath of Zeus. In other words, he was super specialized toward healing. No matter where he went, his job was just to toss out heals. Therefore, he would need no directing.

That was appreciated in itself. It was annoying when he struck weird poses where we could see him and started pointlessly dancing around the enemies, but apart from that, he was basically just an NPC healer. So you could say he was less annoying to handle than he could have been.

“But wait, I say! Monsters, witness the power of my dance!”

Ryuutarou stood behind Emily where the Death Chariot could see him and struck a bizarre pose.

Eugh. Creepy, but he is healing us, so I can let it slide. Anyway, it's time to take down the Death Chariot!

Death Chariot attacked.

Emily guarded the attack, taking 39 damage.

Dragon Head attacked.

But Emily guarded the attack!

Dragon Head attacked.

But Emily guarded the attack!

The Death Chariot itself attacked with its scythe, while the two Dragon Heads erupted from under its black robe to bite. Emily's guard was rock-solid, as an armor knight's should be! The main body's attacks didn't do much, and the Dragon Heads' attacks did nothing. Tanks that they were, armor knights were just too OP against physical attacks. This would prove to be very useful.

"My turn! Elemental Circle!"

"Chirp! Blue!"

Ice attribute, eh? Well, no harm done. If the dark attribute came out right now, that would pose some issues.

Yano, Shizuku, and I stood in the radius of the Elemental Circle and started focus-firing on the Death Chariot. The icicles that came with my icy Elemental Circle slowly helped chip away at its health. Emily kept its aggro on her, so all we had to do was just keep attacking.

Then, Yano heated things up with her ultimate! "Ultimate move: Hidden Rising Blast!"

Leaping high into the air, she kicked off of the Death Chariot itself, using the propulsion to send herself somersaulting backward. She shot two rounds in

midair before landing. It ended with a kick, before finally enveloping her in a translucent effect.

This was an ultimate made by Skill Chain, with one of its components being the Stealth Shot that kept the user from drawing aggro. The kick was a martial artist art, called Lightning Kick. Meanwhile, the shots were from the gun art, Double Blast.

Yuuna activated Hidden Rising Blast.

Dealt 1,113 damage to Death Chariot!

Hey, that was pretty decent damage.

As it had Stealth Shot included, she wasn't going to steal aggro from Emily using this ultimate. Often, kicking off a fight with your ultimate would mean stealing aggro from your tank; including Stealth Shot was essentially insurance to keep from doing so. It was very like Yano, who despite her gaudy appearance, knew how to read the room and plan around things well. Her personality was very much involved in her playstyle.

I wanted to show off the power of my ultimate move, but if I did, I would definitely get beaten down; it would just steal too much aggro. Of course, I'd be fine if Yano activated Guilty Steal on me, but then *she* would be stuck with aggro, leaving our actual tank, Emily, dead in the water. I could even use another if I got our sword dancer to use Sword Samba, but if those two combined blows didn't defeat the boss, then it would mess up our aggro management entirely. Emily would likely be useless the rest of the fight.

Usually, with our double sword dancer loadout of Akira and Akabane, the number of Sword Sambas increased. With those two, I might've been able to rattle off ultimates until the boss died.

No matter what happened, until the boss went down with two of my ultimates, it was a lot safer for me to stick to Elemental Circle duty. It was kinda boring, though. While it sucked that I had nothing to do in a boss battle of all things, it was better than how I was before! Under the effects of Elemental Circle, I was doing some pretty okay damage myself.

“Then I shall do the same. Rising Dragon’s Triple Gleam!”

Shizuku activated her ultimate as well. It started off with an uppercut, followed by three somersault kicks! It was a crazy-acrobatic ultimate. Martial artists had some tough animations!

Shizuku activated Rising Dragon’s Triple Gleam.

Dealt 1,544 damage to Death Chariot!

We’re making good progress! Get ‘em, guys! Sorry I’m dead weight!

Just then...

Dragon Head prepared to activate Fire Breath!

Dragon Head prepared to activate Fire Breath!

The two Dragon Heads simultaneously breathed out hot fire! Armor knights were gods of taking physical attacks, but they were weak against magic. Emily’s HP bar went way down all at once.

Dragon Head activated Fire Breath.

Dealt 625 damage to Emily!

Dragon Head activated Fire Breath.

Dealt 611 damage to Emily!

Dragon Head activated Fire Breath.

Dealt 425 damage to Ryuutarou!

Dragon Head activated Fire Breath.

Dealt 408 damage to Ryuutarou!

Wow! The guy dancing like a weirdo behind her got caught in the blast!

“Aaaah! Ouch, that one hurt!”

“But wait, I say! Worry not, for I will heal us!”

Ryuutarou immediately got to dancing and firing off healing magic. With some added help from Maeda, their HP was quickly back to maximum. Without a comment, Ryuutarou moved away from Emily and positioned himself at a distance. Looks like he learned.

We succeeded in healing them, but now, the Death Chariot spun to face Shizuku. When players were attacked by enemies and lost health, they lost a corresponding amount of aggro. Emily had just taken a ton of damage, reducing her aggro until Shizuku had the most, partly thanks to Yano using Stealth Shot to suppress the amount of aggro she generated.

“Hm?!”

Death Chariot attacked.

Shizuku guarded the attack, taking 207 damage.

Dragon Head attacked.

Shizuku guarded the attack, taking 115 damage.

Dragon Head attacked.

Shizuku guarded the attack, taking 107 damage.

Yukatas came with low defense, so even when guarding, she took a hefty amount of damage. This wasn't looking too good.

“Don't worry, I got this!” Emily activated Provoke.

However, the Death Chariot still wouldn't turn to her.

“Ultimate move: Crimson Calamity!”

Fwooooooom!

From the lance she stabbed into the ground, bright-red pillars of flames shot in all directions.

Emily activated Crimson Calamity.

Dealt 1,577 damage to Death Chariot!

After the aggro from that Crimson Calamity, the Death Chariot finally turned its attention back on Emily. She had been saving her Crimson Calamity instead of using it right off the bat for the sole purpose of stealing aggro when she needed to. As one should expect of Emily, she was a skilled player. I could watch at ease.

The battle continued from there until the Death Chariot was at around a third of his maximum HP. Then, a system message came in!

It has been 28 minutes since you entered. In 120 seconds, you will be booted from the dungeon.

Whoa, dang! We're almost out of time?!

Panic surfaced on Emily's face. "This isn't good! We can win against it, but time is an issue!"

Indeed, at this rate, we would be forced out before we could finish it off.

"But we've only just gotten to the good part!" Shizuku complained.

Yano, Maeda, and I weren't nearly as worried because we all knew that we had a way to make this work. The god of one-shot firepower! One of the great drama cannons!

"Finish 'im off, Takashiro!"

"The rest is all up to you!"

"Awesome! Finally, my time has come!"

I cast a wide-range Enfeebling Circle, in service of managing my remaining MP.

"Once I ult, I'm gonna need a Sword Samba!"

I made sure to warn Ryuutarou ahead of time. He wasn't Akira, so it was safer

to tell him first. Naturally, I would've preferred her any day. She always followed up without me saying anything, and she was cute. Really, Akira was just flawless. Meanwhile, I never knew what this guy was gonna do, and I was scared to talk to him because he was a gross perv. Really, he was just... nothing but flaws. I really wanted Akira to come back to us soon.

Maybe I was getting a little selfish. At first, I thought we'd be two bros gaming together, no matter how it looked to other people. But now, I just didn't feel fulfilled unless I had that beauty by my side. Truly, having a female sword dancer was like a drug. Once you had it, you couldn't go back.

Whether he understood what I wanted or not, Ryuutarou dramatically crossed his arms, standing tall. "Indeed! I have seen your cooperation with my dear sister. Leave it to me!"

Not that it matters to me, but is he just mute unless he crosses his arms? Ugh, I'm getting a headache.

But anyway, we were out of time. Now was the time to do what needed to be done!

"Here goes. Final Strike!"

I activated Final Strike first. Then I squatted down, turned my upper body, and readied the Quickdraw stance. My body was quickly enveloped in crimson flames the shape of a bird—Suzaku. The combination between Turnover, Explosive Tackle, and Quickdraw!

"Ultimate move: Vermilion Wing!"

Shrouded in flames, I charged toward the Death Chariot with incredible speed! Then, using my momentum, I dashed and swung my sword!

"Graaaaargh!"

It was a clean hit, causing the Death Chariot to cry out.

After unsheathing my sword, I slid by the Death Chariot until I was behind it.

Ren activated Vermilion Wing.

Dealt 5,866 damage to Death Chariot!

Yep, there's that big damage!

As usual, the Damascus Canesword disintegrated into shining particles.

Yep, there's my money flying away!

Even after that, the Death Chariot still lived. Thanks to all the damage I'd dealt, it charged toward me. My level of aggro far surpassed Emily's now, to the point that no amount of her effort could make it target her again. Furthermore, as usual after my ultimates, my HP was low enough to put me in critical condition. If I took one blow, I was insta-dead.

"Ren, watch out!" Emily shouted. "It's heading straight for you!"

"I've got your back. Guilty Steal!"

Yano stripped me of all of my aggro, taking it for herself. Thus, the Death Chariot pivoted toward Yano instead of me. She held her shield at the ready, in full guard position. She couldn't quite stand up to Emily's armor knight, but at the very least, she wouldn't go down easily with her shield up.

"Oh? Neat! Good job, Yuuna!" Emily applauded.

Then, Ryuutarou began shaking and shimmying. It was nothing like Sword Samba's usual animation.

What on earth is he doing? Do male sword dancers have different animations?

"Receive my holy blessing! Heaven and earth, fire and sea, confer all your blessings upon these sheep!"

He was saying a whole lot of stuff that did absolutely nothing. *Is this just some weird dance he likes and not an actual skill?!*

"You're not doing anything! Just hurry up, please!" I cried, forging a new Canesword.

I wanted to kick myself for wasting words on him, but we were almost out of time. He seriously needed to get his butt in gear.

"Very well. Sword Samba!"

See?! The animation isn't different between sexes!

Regardless, my skills were now off cooldown.

“Final Strike!”

Once again, I was enveloped in the birdly flames. I dashed over to the enemy, unleashing one great slash at the body of the Death Chariot.

“Ultimate move: Vermilion Wing!”

Ren activated Vermilion Wing.

Dealt 5,866 damage to Death Chariot!

Ren defeated Death Chariot.

“Graaarh... Raaaaaargh!”

Letting out a guttural yell, the Death Chariot slowly began to collapse.

Nice, we did it! Wait, did I just get another log message?

Death Chariot prepared to activate Dark Possession.

We had defeated it, but it was still kicking. I wondered if this was some sort of final attack. Sometimes, bosses did a sort of Hail Mary just before death, as if to say, *I’m taking you down with me!*

What’s it gonna do?!

While we braced ourselves, the Death Chariot’s body morphed into a small, black light. It headed toward Ryuutarou, and he was quickly sucked in. Immediately after, *poof!* He was covered in the black light. Once it disappeared, we saw that Ryuutarou was now clad in the Death Chariot’s bloody, black robe.

“Oooh!”

I for one loved it. This was far easier on the eyes than his nudity.



“Huh? That’s what the boss was wearing,” Emily murmured.

“What a good guy! He fixed this perv’s outfit! Right, Kotomi?”

“Erm, it does seem a bit better. Not that it’s *good*, per se.”

“Seeing that its enemy was nude, it gave him the very clothes off his back. Truly a samurai’s compassion.” Shizuku had an interesting view of the events.

In other words, it was like, *Wow, do you not own clothes? Fine; just wear mine, then.*

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Ahahaha! Who knew the boss was so nice?!”

“Wow, that’s like sending salt to the enemy! Just like Uesugi Kenshin would.”

Emily was a fan of Japanese history. She knew a lot about it, it turned out. We’d played a historical strategy game together, after all! That was what grabbed her interest in the first place.

Yano also found it hilarious. “Pfft! Look at him, giving clothes to the guy he was just fighting! Looks like someone’s in looove.”

“Maybe he’s just picky about appearances?” I joked.

“Ahahahaha! Sounds like a mom!”

Either way, good job. Thanks, Death Chariot!

Despite how terrifyingly ugly it was, the chariot was growing in popularity among us. However, one person alone seemed unmoved.

“Grrr! Do you expect me to wear *this* disgusting attire?!” Ryuutarou quickly unequipped the robe, basking once again in his beloved nakedness.

You’re one to talk, man! You’re plenty more disgusting than the chariot!

Sure, it was a black robe with bloodstains and scary writing, and it came with weird, ghastly effects. At least people would just think you liked horror-themed cosplay. I figured it was better than being an unabashed pervert!

“This is an unwelcome favor. I do not need it, so you may as well take it,” he grumbled, forcing it on me.

Blood-Dead Robe

Type: Armor

Level: 50

DEF: 77

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: All stats -100, movement speed down.

Hah! It's just cursed garbage! If it was wearing this, we must've fought it while it was weakened.

No matter what, reducing all of your stats just wasn't good in battle. You could try to just wear it between battles for fun, but it reduced movement speed too, so it was a pain to have on. Truly a real problem child among gear. The only people who might be happy to possess it would be item-lovers with a penchant for collecting.

Hm. Maybe Homura would buy it off me for a high price?

"Uh, I don't really want it, but thanks?"

All I could really do was just throw it in my inventory.

It has been 29 minutes since you entered. In 60 seconds, you will be booted from the dungeon.

Looking at the system message, I cried, "Oh, no! We gotta hurry! Run, run, run!"

We rushed to the warp zone that appeared in the center of the floor and progressed to B11F.

"Woo, nice! Found the save point!"

It was right in front of where we'd warped in. *Looks like the rule is still one save every five floors. Good, good.*

After completing the save and taking a short breather, we were forcefully

expelled. As usual, the air in front of me distorted as we were kicked out of Aswarth's Undersea Ruins.

At this point, we could tentatively note that every five floors, there was a save point. Furthermore, there was a boss every ten floors. As we progressed, however, that pattern could change at any point. Oh, and we had even *more* important information: the Death Chariot was a good guy! Duly noted.

I wanted to hurry up and map the layout of each floor before I forgot it all.

"Yo, Emily! Time for some mapping!"

"Okay! Coming!"

Emily and I quickly whipped out the Dealer's Desk and got to work drawing maps. Naturally, I'd brought it with me! We were planning to do all five of our attempts today, so we needed to take care of this before we were bombarded with even more information.

"Err, this was over here... and that was..."

"Oh, no. That's like *this*. Then we saw..."

"What are you two doing now?" Shizuku asked, curious.

"See, we're making maps of the floors we've been on," I explained. "Looking through them later might help us out somehow."

"If there's a method to how they're generated, it can help us strategize!" Emily added.

Shizuku gave us a bemused look. "That sounds... rather boring. Do you enjoy it?"

"Yes, ma'am!" we replied in unison.

"I see. You're like two little lab workers. I suppose that is one way of having fun, isn't it?" She seemed a little more convinced.

"How was it, Shizuku? Did you enjoy raiding that dungeon?"

"Yes, it was rather exciting. It's quite a new experience, but partaking in explosive battles is fun in its own way. I think I'd like to accompany your little group for a while longer."

“You’re very welcome! We’re short on people, anyway.”

When we finished making our maps, we decided to dive right back into the dungeon. We had up to five runs a day, and darn it, we were going to use them! After each run, we mapped everything, then went right back in again. Eventually, our day of dungeoneering came to an end. For the next few days, we would repeat this process.

Save points every five floors and bosses every ten floors were hard and fast rules. We didn’t necessarily reach a save point every time, but we were able to progress often enough. Other players didn’t seem to be too much farther in, and I hadn’t heard of anyone grabbing the Rainbow Guard yet.

Things changed, however, once we passed B50F. After descending five floors down from B51F, we expected to find a save point—but we did not. In other words, the intervals between them had increased, making it much harder to progress past B51F. We would have to get some real strategizing in!

Akira would be back soon too. It was time to really show what we were made of!

Chapter 6: A Worthy Foe

Early in the morning, Emily and I were huddled together in the floating cottage, trying to come up with a strategy to tackle the dungeon's increased difficulty.

"Hmm... I'm still not seeing a pattern in these gate conditions," I muttered.

We'd recorded every single floor along with their directives, but at this point, there wasn't a clear pattern. Back when we were overhunting Golden Bunnies in the Sky Fissures, it had become a breeze once we figured out how it worked. Incidentally, the Golden Bunny Festival had apparently been a bug! It was fixed shortly after, but we'd already used it as much as we needed, so I didn't mourn.

"Me either," Emily replied. "After B51F, we'll probably have to switch to Special or Super Special Warp Stones instead of using the normal ones. I guess that's why they added multiple kinds of stones."

"Guess so. Special Warp Stones have double the time limit at one hour, so I guess that means we'll have to go double the floors to match. Ten it is, then."

"I think you're right. The number of Special Warp Stones you can have is pretty limited, so the other parties should be slowed down too."

"Yeah. You gotta either win one in a minigame stall or trade items you get from Aswarth's."

"Correct. And in the minigames, you need to pull out a high score, or you won't get one. Each game can only give you one Special Warp Stone, and each person can only get one per day. They really made them hard to obtain."

I shrugged. "Better to have just a few than to have none, I guess. Let's try to get Special Warp Stones from all the stalls, even if we can only get one per day."

"Okay. I know the two of us can do it!"

"Yeah! Now, that aside, the rest of them will have to be exchanged using items we find in the dungeon."

“Sounds like people will be using normal Warp Stones to find items to trade in for Special Warp Stones, huh?”

“For those who can’t get high scores in the stalls, I think that’s the only option. They’re a lot more important than I expected.”

“Mmhmm. Dungeoneering just to find Special Warp Stones is a heck of a time loss, so using other sources to cover your costs is way faster.”

“The problem now is: how many floors does the dungeon even have?”

“Yeah... As long as we don’t know that, I guess all we can do is get as many Special Warp Stones as we can, huh?”

“Either that, or we figure out a way to speed things up so we can go ten floors with a single Warp Stone.”

“I think with our current comp and gear, we’re limited to seven or eight at best. And that’s even if we get lucky gate conditions.”

“Akira’s coming back today, so that should raise our firepower a little. Our current sword dancer doesn’t even attack.”

Pacifist vegetarian that he was, he would never attack foes. I had to wonder how the heck he got his level so high; he must’ve leeches EXP off of his parties along the way. Though that just begged the question of how he got a party to let him leech.

“Well, that’s Ryuutarou’s playstyle. Who knows if he’s role-playing, or what? Gamers have fun in their own ways, so.”

“Heh. What kind of role-play would that be, I wonder? Hahahaha...” Clearly he was role-playing an exhibitionist, but I was hesitant to just *tell* Emily that, so I intentionally gave an evasive reply.

“I could never do it, so I do kinda envy his freedom. Not that I want to be like him, of course.”

“Yeah. As long as you’re getting paid, you’ve gotta put on a respectable performance, right?”

“Yep. I’ve gotta land among the top players, or I’m in deep trouble. It’s also a matter of my reputation.”

“Sounds pretty rough, in its own way.”

“Any job is like that, I’m sure. But when you’re a pro gamer, it does add a new layer of difficulty. That said, I’m the one who chose to do it, and I’m glad I did! Summertide is kinda like a vacation, so it really gives me a chance to let my hair down and have fun.”

Emily lifted her arms up and stretched. Then, she smoothly leaned against my shoulder.

“It’d be so nice if you joined the team, Ren. You should give it some honest thought. I could introduce you to them!”

“Yeah, no way. I can’t speak English for the life of me.”

“It’s okay. I can speak Japanese just fine, anyway.”

The two of us continued chatting away until suddenly, Akira materialized in the cottage.

“Good morniiing!”

Contrary to her smile and sickly sweet tone, she aggressively slammed herself down on the couch, making a loud noise.

That couch sure had some plush cushions. Woohoo...

“Uh, hey. Morning, Akira.”

“Ooh, hey, Akira! It’s been a while!”

“Yes, that it has. Let us be productive today, shall we? I’ve been anticipating this for some time.”

Brr! Dang it, there’s that dark aura emanating from her again!

Emily had some ungodly resistance to the dark aura, so she was perfectly calm. “Hey, Akira? You don’t need to be jealous of me and Ren or anything. We’re just like this because we’ve been friends forever. Besides—”

“What are you talking about? I’m not jealous. It’s cool; don’t worry about it.” Akira smiled, but Emily’s claims were clearly falling on deaf ears.

Urgh. If they don’t get along, that’s gonna be a bit problematic for me. Will we be okay in the dungeon with this much tension?

Feeling a little uneasy, we headed off to Aswarth's. Today's party was Akira, Maeda, Yano, Emily, Shizuku, and me. This was Akira's first time in the dungeon, so we started off with a normal Warp Stone to let her test the waters.

I was partly hoping that switching out Ryuutarou for Akira would have enough of an effect to let us break through the ten-floor barrier, but if all went well, we might even find the item necessary to trade in for a Special Warp Stone.

As far as I could see, the developers intended for Special Warp Stones to be used for runs past B51F. But if we followed their intent, we likely wouldn't win this race. If we could break through ten floors with normal Warp Stones while everyone else was wasting time farming Special Warp Stones, then we could truly lead the pack. Of course, I didn't mind using the Special Warp Stones we had so far, but I absolutely wanted to avoid going into the dungeon just to do extra farming.

I had believed that once my best friend returned, we would be able to breach the ten-floor barrier. Alas, things could never be so simple!

"Ultimate move!"

Akira and Emily began their ultimates at the same time.

"Cross Crescent!"

"Crimson Calamity!"

Akira's slashes and Emily's flames slammed into the Frozen Lizard at the same time, killing it with ease.

Now that's what you call overkill!

If you wanted to successfully make it through ten floors in the strict thirty-minute time limit that a normal Warp Stone demanded, you needed some real efficiency. We didn't have the time to waste any of our precious AP on overkilling, as that would lead to a net time loss.

Akira and Emily knew as much, but they just couldn't get in sync, leading to a whole lot of unnecessary clashing. Not just in terms of timing their ultimates or arts, but also in terms of timing their healing and which directions they moved in.

“Aah! Sorry, Akira. I messed up.”

“Oh, no. I should apologize.”

Neither of them was doing it on purpose, but we were losing more and more time. At this point, it wasn't all too different from having Ryuutarou here... for the most part.

It has been 30 minutes since you entered. You will now be booted from the dungeon.

The system message came, signaling the end of our run. At this point, we were at B57F. It had been a pretty rough ride. Even worse, we hadn't found any items to exchange for Special Warp Stones. In other words, one of our five attempts at Aswarth's today had ended in failure.

“Aww. It's already over,” Emily said, disappointed.

Akira was equally bummed. “It feels like thirty minutes isn't anywhere near enough.”

I had to agree. “Yeah. Though I think we did have bad luck with gate conditions there.”

Shizuku hummed thoughtfully. “Takashiro, I believe thirty minutes is too strict a time limit. Maybe we should use a Special Warp Stone; if anything, perhaps you could even use the Super Special Warp Stone I gave you.”

“Nah, I think using the Super right now is a waste. We've got four Special Warp Stones, so how about we use one of those for now?”

Incidentally, we had won a few more from the stalls.

Emily nodded. “Good idea. Let's do it.”

“Sure,” Akira said. “It's all you, Ren.”

“Sounds a-okay to me!” Yano chirped.

“It may be best to prioritize progress,” Maeda assented.

As nobody seemed to have any complaints, we decided to go in using the

Special Warp Stone for our second run. Thanks to the full hour we were given, we made it just fine despite Akira and Emily's somewhat poor teamwork.

After delving all the way down to B60F, we found a save point on the next floor. It was clear that the interval was every ten floors. Also, there was no boss on B60F.

"Nice, nice! A Special Warp Stone really is all we need."

"Hey, Ren. I say we do another with the Special stone!" Emily proposed, and the others agreed. So we decided to use another Special Warp Stone.

For our third run of the day, we went from B61F to B70F without issue and saved at B71F. Again, no boss. We were just about ready for the next one to appear.

On the fourth run, we went from B71F to B79F. All was going well. Upon reaching B80F, we heard a familiar *ping!*

Gate Condition: Defeat the boss monster!

"Heh. 'Bout time you showed up!"

We still had fifteen minutes left. We'd be able to win with time to spare. As we were using a Special Warp Stone, we couldn't afford to lose!

This boss area was unlike the arena where we'd fought the Death Chariot. It was the usual rectangular room, but crowded with tons of lush foliage.

If they made it like this on purpose, does that mean we're up against a plant boss?

Indeed, my prediction was correct. The ground started to quake as a humongous plant sprouted from the center of the floor. It bloomed with enormous black roses.

Level 120 Hadean Rose

Crown Icon (rare monster)

It was an even higher level than the Death Chariot! That made sense, as it was on a deeper floor. Either way, it was time for it to meet its end!

“Wow, it’s big. I’m excited to see how it attacks! Let’s go!” Our valiant Emily took the vanguard, charging at the Hadean Rose.

See enemies, charge in. I don’t know if that’s like the tank’s instinct or what, but it’s a pretty successful formula.

“I’ll try hitting it with a shock wave to see what it does!” Akira shouted to her.

“Gotcha!”

Immediately after, Emily activated Provoke. Akira’s Skyfall shock wave struck the monster a moment later.

Akira attacked.

Dealt 102 damage to Hadean Rose!

Yep, looks like normal damage to me. As Emily had used Provoke, it would choose her as the target of its attacks... or so I thought.

When the Hadean Rose took damage, it arched all the way back before flying forward, sending strange, round things spewing from its flower.

Hadean Rose sent seeds flying!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

Whoa, what the heck?!

Black roses sprouted up around the Hadean Rose, looking almost like smaller versions of it. They moved their stalks like little legs, all closing in on Akira at once!

“Huh? Hey, why me?!”

Akira was shocked. They should have been focused on Emily. It was a surprise to me too. The approaching cluster of Black Roses sprayed a black mist in Akira’s direction.

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 333 damage to Akira!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 333 damage to Akira!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 333 damage to Akira!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 333 damage to Akira!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 333 damage to Akira!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 333 damage to Akira!

Akira is exhausted...

The Dark Hazes erupting from the Black Roses felled Akira in an instant!

“Whoa, seriously?!”

“Everyone, I’m sorry!” Akira said with a sniffle, then dropped to the ground, still wearing her yukata.

This thing is bad news! It trounced my poor best friend in no time.

“What’s goin’ on here?” Yano cried. “Emily was supposed to have aggro!”

“It must be a counterattack!” Emily shot back.

Basically, instead of actively attacking the player it targeted, the Hadean Rose would instead act in response to attacks it received. No doubt Emily had been targeted by the monster, but the fact that it had instead gone after Akira meant that it had responded to Skyfall’s shock wave by spitting out a ton of Black Roses.

If there’s any way to die on your first attempt, it’s by dying to weird counterattacks like this one! Really, she had no way to get out of that.

Had it not happened immediately after Emily had activated Provoke, she could’ve used it again to draw the horde of Black Roses away from Akira. But as the skill had still been on cooldown, she couldn’t do it. Indeed, Akira and Emily’s gameplay just wasn’t meshing right now. And it was highlighted at the worst possible time!

“Let’s start by killing these things without touching the big one!”

“Yeah, good idea!”

If we attacked the big one, it could counter by vomiting up more Black Rose seeds. First, we needed to stabilize and figure out what conditions made it counterattack. Skyfall’s shock wave was a magic attack, so maybe that was what had caused it? In that case, I first wanted to see if it would counter physical attacks.

Emily once again activated Provoke, taking the aggro of six Black Roses. While leaving Emily to tank, we dealt with the Black Roses one by one. In terms of strength, they were about as difficult as the normal mobs in Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins. Still, it was pretty annoying when they all came and activated Dark Haze at once.

Upon taking their focus fire, lower-HP classes would die immediately like Akira had. Emily’s armor knight and people with stupid-high VIT like me could make it through, but as Dark Haze itself was a magic attack, increasing one’s magic resistance was clearly the best way to reduce the damage.

Regardless, it was too dangerous to attack the Hadean Rose when Emily’s

Provoke was on cooldown, as it could just spit out seeds and cause a Dark Haze explosion at any time. I could survive them with my sheer HP alone, but using my ultimates lowered my health nearly to zero, so I would still need Emily to take aggro if I didn't want to die immediately.

"Ren! Wanna try a physical attack next?" Emily suggested as she hacked away at the Black Roses. Clearly she had the same idea as I did.

"Yeah, let's do that!"

"Try your ultimate! They might not counter ults!"

"All right!"

I was using attacks from my Elemental Circle to help take them down, as well. This time, the circle was yellow. Earth element, then. As we chipped them down, the Hadean Rose did nothing. Soon, one Black Rose remained.

Is it just a machine that does nothing but spit out seeds? RPGs do occasionally contain counter-only bosses.

Hadean Rose sent seeds flying!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

Hey, stop! I didn't even do anything!

"This thing summons Black Roses even when you don't attack?!" I barked.

It shot seeds when you attacked, and it shot seeds when you did nothing. That seemed like all the monster could do, but it was really annoying!

"Oh! It's me this time!"

The newly birthed Black Roses scrambled toward Emily.

Instead of a counterattack, is the Hadean Rose just targeting her? She has the most aggro, after all, since she's Provoking so much.

"Magic Barrier!" Maeda cast support magic on her.

Magic Barrier was force-field magic that reduced the damage dealt to a target. It had a short duration of only thirty seconds and a target of just one ally, but it cut the damage they took in half. As the effect duration was so short, it required someone who could figure out the best time to use it and do so promptly. This time, the timing was perfect.

Nice job, Maeda!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 161 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 161 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 161 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 161 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 161 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 161 damage to Emily!

Nice. At this rate, Emily will never go down! She'll take those hits like a champ!

Following that, Maeda cast a healing spell on Emily. "Ex-Heal!"

This action prompted the Black Roses to turn toward Maeda, which meant that her healing aggro took priority now.

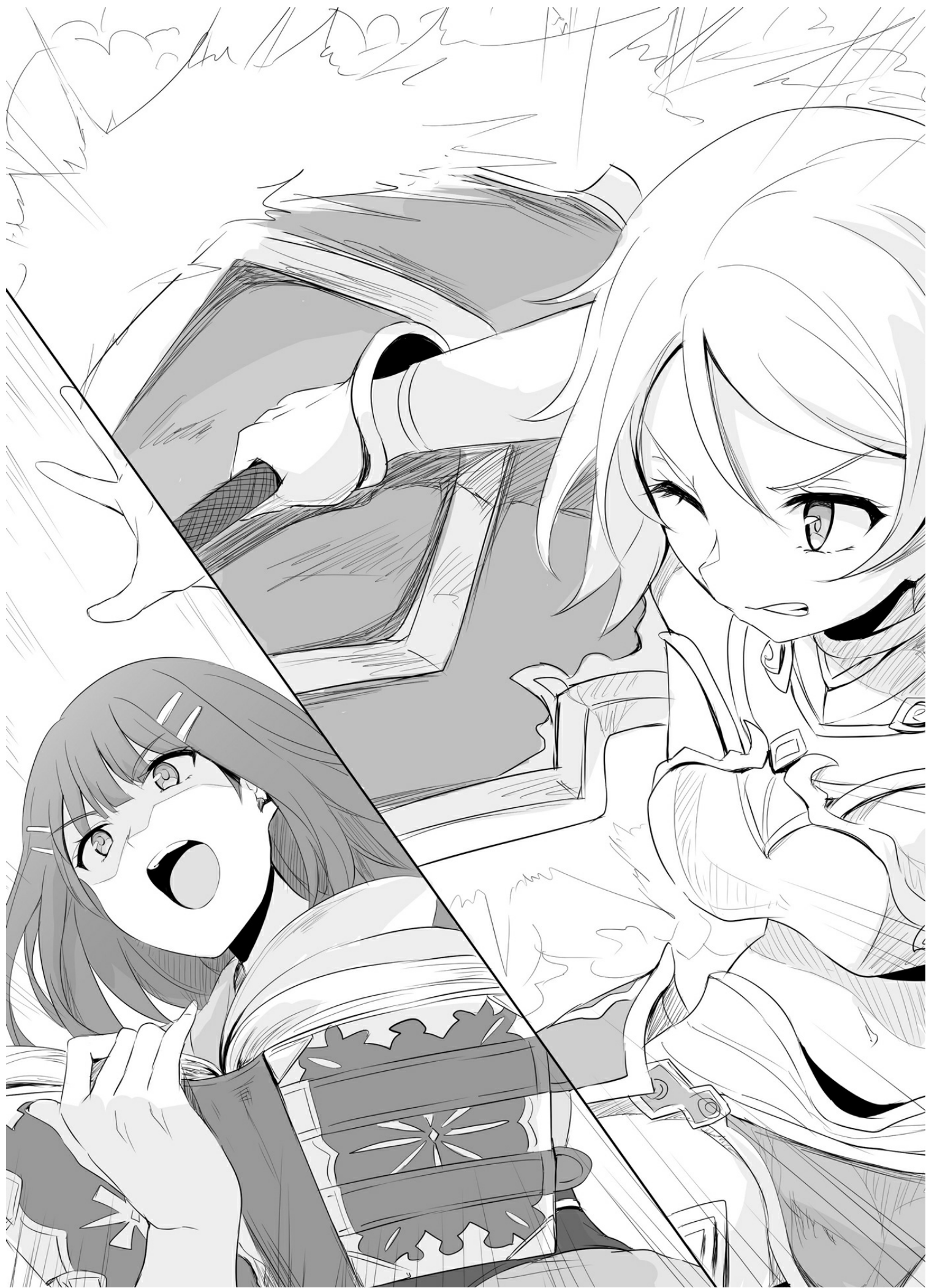
“Nope, you’re stayin’ right here!” Emily promptly activated Provoke, causing them to return to her.

Awesome! They’re working well together.

“Ultimate move: Hidden Rising Blast!”

“Ultimate move: Rising Dragon’s Triple Gleam!”

Yano and Shizuku attacked the young Black Roses with their ultimates, killing them. Now we had dealt with both the ones that had come from the counterattack and the ones it had created spontaneously!



“It’s just the main body now!”

“Go, Ren!” Emily shouted.

“Yeah. I’ll smack him good!”

I charged toward the Hadean Rose. With a wide-ranged Debrain Circle, I reduced my MP to nothing. This circle reduced enemy INT. As for why I had chosen this one, it was to somewhat reduce the damage of the Black Roses that would be created if the Hadean Rose decided to counter. As their Dark Haze was magic damage, reducing their INT should weaken it.

“Here goooes! Ultimate move: Dead Eeend!”

Smaaaaaash!

My slash, glowing purple, tore through the Hadean Rose! Vermilion Wing came with a fire-elemental effect, but it was possible that it would register as magic damage, so I’d gone with something that was unmistakably physical damage!

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 4,944 damage to Hadean Rose!

Mmm, good damage! All right, how’s its HP bar looking?

I checked, and much to my surprise it had gone down by a sixth. That meant it had around 30,000 HP.

Interesting. It’s not actually that much. Akira’s dead, but if we can just deal with the Black Roses, we might be able—

Hadean Rose sent seeds flying!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

“Gah! It counters physical damage too?!”

“It’s okay, I got this!”

Emily activated Provoke, stealing away the aggro of the six Black Roses.

Hadean Rose sent seeds flying!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

“What? Again?!” I blurted.

“Talk about crappy timing!” Emily whined.

Was the second one a normal action?!

The Hadean Rose shot seeds out to counterattack, and it shot seeds out as a normal action. In this case, it must have countered and then followed up with a normal action. In a flash, twelve Black Roses had appeared.

“Rgh, fine. Crimson Calamity!”

Fwooooooom!

Emily enveloped all of the Black Roses in her Crimson Calamity, forcefully pulling them in her direction. However, they were not weak enough to die from just one blow. Would she be subjected to the terror of twelve Dark Hazes?!

“Magic Barrier!”

Maeda once again swooped in to save the day. With my Debrain Circle, Emily ought to be able to take their assault.

Hadean Rose sent seeds flying!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

“Huh?!”

Six more?! Oh, right. Emily’s Crimson Calamity is an AoE attack, so the Hadean Rose was enveloped in the blast. That means it was a counter!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Black Rose activated Dark Haze.

Dealt 148 damage to Emily!

Emily is exhausted...

Even our armor knight couldn't stand up to eighteen Dark Hazes!

"Urgh! Yeah, this is too much for me. Sorry!" Emily collapsed on the spot.

Goodness, what fertility this rose has! Normally, there's some sort of limit to how many mobs they can bring out at once. Heck, maybe there is, but eighteen is just way too many to deal with!

That wasn't even the worst of it either.

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

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Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

Hadean Rose recovered 148 HP!

“Whoa, it recovered?!”

Does this thing heal based on the damage dealt by its Black Roses? What on earth are we supposed to do?

If it were just summoning Black Roses as a counterattack, then we could smack it with big damage, deal with the mobs, smack it again, and so on. It didn't just counter, though; the main body was able to summon Black Roses at will. Then, any damage they dealt would heal the main body. Getting through 30,000 HP in these conditions would be a Herculean task!

Careless focus fire would also lead to tons of counters coming our way. And once an armor knight had eighteen Black Roses on her, she was done for in an instant. With that being the case, either we had to figure out a way to stop it from summoning Black Roses, or we had to believe that there was an upper limit to the quantity it could spit out and just try to mow it down.

We also couldn't forget that this wasn't a normal battlefield, where we could take our time as necessary. This was Aswarth's Undersea Ruins with its strict time limit. If we took too long, we would be forcefully expelled in the middle of battle. Time running out meant victory for the enemy and defeat for us. Taking into account its abilities and the floor's general layout, this flower made for one heck of an opponent!

Just as I was thinking all this, something struck me. *Oof!*

Black Rose attacked.

Dealt 31 damage to Ren!

Ren is exhausted...

Hadean Rose recovered 31 HP!

“Blarf!”

The eighteen monsters that had felled Emily crowded around me. I couldn't guard against every single one, and my HP was down to 1 after using my ultimate. In other words, I was going to meet my maker!

With Yano, Maeda, and Shizuku as the only survivors, they were helpless against the eighteen-strong mob of Black Roses.

Hadean Rose sent seeds flying!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!

Wow! Okay, so they're twenty-four strong now! This is way too much; they're growing like rehydrating seaweed!

The three of them couldn't keep up with the mob.

"Aargh, we ain't gonna make it!" Yano lamented.

"There's nothing we can do, is there?!" Maeda asked, panicked.

Shizuku grunted. "We're too outnumbered!"

Thus, we faced our second total party kill in Aswarth's Undersea Ruins.

Chapter 7: Dropping a Bomb before Our Goodbye

We revived after being forcefully returned to our floating cottage.

“So, we died,” I said simply.

Emily sighed. “That we did. The boss was a lot punchier than I expected.”

“Sorry for dying first, guys,” mumbled Akira, looking dejected.

“Nah, you couldn’t help it. First try is always scuffed.”

“First try or not, that boss was just really tough. It’s a clear difficulty increase from past bosses,” Emily said with a frown.

“Yeah, for sure,” I agreed. “It’s like it was actually trying to take us down.”

“Yep. Most likely, he’ll be the deciding factor in who wins the race to get the Rainbow Guard. He’s just that tough.”

Emily was probably right. That flower’s role was to be a sieve which let only the best players through; a steep difficulty spike was necessary.

“Do we have a plan? Ren, Emily?”

“A plan? Not at the moment, no.” I shook my head.

“Right. We need more information,” Emily added.

“Yeah. But that’s why...”

Simultaneously, the two of us announced, “We’re getting fired up!”

Akira chuckled, looking a little sad. “Ahahaha. It’s like you two share a brain. I’m kinda envious.”

Just then, Shizuku cocked her head to one side. “Hm? I heard a voice out front.”

Indeed, someone was addressing us from outside the cottage. Did we have a visitor?

“Oh, I’ll go take a look.”

I went to the entrance to see who was there, and I found a blond guy a bit older than me.

Wow, a foreigner! Err, wait. I feel like I've seen this guy somewhere before.

"Excuse me... Emily... please."

He was saying something, but I couldn't understand any of it except for "Excuse me," "Emily," and "please." Man, I was so bad at English. Especially when it came to listening! Typical of a Japanese person like me. With some study, I might be able to read and even write it, but I'd never be able to speak it. Emily spoke Japanese, so I figured this was a result of me relying on that fact for so long.

"Pleeease... speak more slowly," I responded without much thought.

He shook his head in irritation and began anew. "Sorry. I hear Emily is around here. Is that true?"

"Ooh! You can speak Japanese?!"

"Emily's such a Japanophile that she made me learn it."

"You must be Lucas, right? I thought I recognized you. You were in a photo that Emily sent me along with one of her letters."

"Yep. You're Ren, I assume? She told me about you. Thank you for all you've done for her."

He extended a hand, to which I gladly responded with a handshake. *Japanese-American friendship! What a lovely thing.*

"Oh, same here, man. Emily's inside, so come on in!"

With that, I headed back into the cottage with Lucas in tow. Emily and the others were sitting in the living room, as they were before.

Upon finding her, Lucas shouted, "Emily!"

"Oh, Lucas? What's the matter?"

"I'm here to pick you up. You need to come back."

The fact that these two Americans were speaking Japanese to each other meant that they were being considerate so that we could understand them.

Very kind, indeed.

“Aw, why? I was just having fun!” Emily seemed pretty annoyed.

“Playtime is over. The academy wants us to record a video of us clearing Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins first. As professionals, we need to listen to our sponsors.”

Lucas was another professional gamer. He was in the same position as Emily, part of a gaming team.

“Hmm. Do I absolutely *have* to go back?”

“You sure do. Are you aware of just how strong the B80F boss is?”

“Yeah. We just witnessed it, actually.”

“To clear that, we have to pull out all the stops. We need you.”

“Mmm... Okay. I guess I have to, then. But I feel bad for Ren and his friends.”

“They’ll be fine. I doubt their results will differ with or without you. Look at their party: symbologist, sword dancer, sky pirate, and scholar. No matter how hard you try, you’ll never defeat the Hadean Rose with that much dead weight. We have to take this seriously.”

Upon hearing that, Emily snapped, “Lucas! That’s just mean to say to Ren and his friends. Don’t make people remember me as the wife of Mr. Rude Guy.”

Yes, she was his wife. I already knew, as Emily had told me in a letter. In America, sixteen-year-olds could get married with parental permission. Depending on the state, that number went even lower. Emily was like an idol in American spheres, so she didn’t make it all too clear to the public eye, but the fact that she announced it so boldly now meant that she didn’t care if any of us here knew.

“What?! His *wife*?!” Akira, Maeda, and Yano yelled in astonishment.

Shizuku seemed surprised as well, as her eyes were wide open.

“Um, then...”

“Emily’s...”

“Really...”

“Married?!” Again, the three harmonized.

“Well, yeah? Esports are sports too, so I’m an athlete! And an athlete’s gotta settle down and focus on competition, after all,” Emily declared with radiant confidence. “Oh, but that’s not public info. Keep it a secret for me, okay?”

Still clammed up from shock, the three of them could only nod.

“Go on, Lucas. Apologize for being rude. If you don’t, you can sleep on the couch from now on.”

“Err, all right. My bad; I went too far. I might have just been jealous because it felt like Emily was being taken away from me.”

With that, Emily smirked mischievously and took his arm in hers. “Excuse me? I’m pretty sure I love you enough. Have I not made it clear yet?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“Well, um... Sorry. I was unmanly.”

Oookay. Get a room, you two.

“Hey, it’s cool,” I replied. “It’s more fun when people think we can’t handle it, anyway. Let the trash shine bright! Kill the giants!”

“Ahahaha. See, he’s like that all the time.”

“He’s just as unusual as you said. Though I do apologize, I can’t back down on this. As professionals, we have a duty to claim victory.”

I gave a gentle shake of my head. “No prob. Again, that’s what makes it fun! Let’s take this seriously!”

“Well, that’s that. I gotta go home. It was fun, everyone. Thank you all.” Emily waved to us and moved to leave the cottage with Lucas.

Behind them, Akira called out, “Emily, wait!”

“Oh? What’s wrong, Akira?”

Akira bowed sharply to her. “I’m... I’m sorry! Y’know, ’cause I had kind of an attitude around you and all.”



“Water under the bridge! Let’s get along nicer next time we get to play together, okay? That’ll be even more fun!” Emily replied with just a clear, sunny smile.

“Yeah. I can’t wait!”

“Take care of Ren. But we’re still gonna beat you to the bottom! We’re putting our all into winning this thing!”

“We’ll see about that. You know I want that Rainbow Guard!”

Akira and Emily exchanged smiles.

What beautiful friendship! I think!



With Emily having returned to her party with Lucas, we decided to stop running Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins for the day. We’d already gone four times anyway, so it was only a loss of one run. If Kokoru, Akabane, or Kataoka showed up, then I was fine with trying again.

That said, we only had one Special Warp Stone and one Super Special Warp Stone now. Using these recklessly wouldn’t do anything about the Hadean Rose problem, making it a waste of valuable resources. We would have to try new and different ways of fighting to find a way to defeat the Hadean Rose. I would have liked to have multiple attempts at honing our tactics, but it would be incredibly difficult to reach it without throwing Special Warp Stones into the void.

In that case, the most efficient way of doing things might be to speed up our runs over time—enough to reach the Hadean Rose with a normal Warp Stone—while simultaneously looking for Special Warp Stones. Emily had been giving us stable results along the way, after all.

If we wanted to go faster, maybe the easiest way to do that would be for me to change classes. My Elemental Circle, of all things, wouldn’t be able to match up to her contributions as an armor knight. Even so, I absolutely refused to change classes! As Emperor of the Underpowered, I would die if I didn’t stick to my tier.

I'll find a way, I'll find a way, I'll find a way! I thought to myself, putting my heart and soul into my research.

Specifically, I was researching the probability of the Elemental Circle's output. If I didn't do more and more attempts, my results could be swayed by luck.

Maeda and Yano, meanwhile, had changed into their swimsuits again and were riding the jet ski all around the cottage. Shizuku was lying down, relaxing in a beach chair, and Akira was sitting on the couch next to me in the living room, where I was doing my research work. A guilty expression was clouding her usually cheery face.

"Here we go, Draco! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle! Elemental Circle!"

"Chirp! Blue, white, yellow, green, dark blue!"

"Hmm. Ice, light, earth, wind, water. One instance of light, huh?"

The black and white circles—dark and light, respectively—were somewhere between two and five percent likely to appear, making them rarer than other circles. It felt nice to get light.

Beside me, Akira heaved a heavy sigh.

"Hey, what's wrong? You've been acting weird."

"Yeah... Ugh, I just feel so bad for being all mean because of a misunderstanding. I'm really sorry."

"Hey, no worries. Anyway, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle!"

"Chichirp! Purple, red, green, yellow, green!"

"Lightning, fire, wind, earth, wind."

"I'm embarrassed about it, though. I never knew I could be like that. Eww, Ren, what are you doing?! What's with the weird getup?!"

Presently, I was wearing the robe that had dropped when we'd defeated the Death Chariot. I wanted to test whether or not changing equipment would lead to a change in circle-activation rates. The blood-splattered feel and ghastly

effects made it feel like something straight out of a horror movie!

“Oh, so basically, this boss called Death Chariot felt bad that Ryuutarou was naked and gave it to him.”

“Ahahahaha, what the heck? That can happen?!”

Thought she might like that joke. Yep, making Akira smile is of the utmost importance.

“I can’t imagine what else it could’ve been. When it died, it was like, ‘Dude, put some clothes on!’ and disappeared. Not a bad guy altogether.” Then, I went on, “Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle!”

“Chirp! Black, blue, black, green, black!”

“Dark, ice, dark, wind, dark. But yeah, if I were you, I’d feel the same. ‘Grr, you’re stealing my best friend?!’ Don’t worry about it, okay? Let’s enjoy summer vacation!”

“Thanks, Ren. Um, here’s the thing, though. I, um... Well, I...”

Akira seemed to want to say something. Her cheeks turned just a shade pinker. I’d never seen her this nervous before. It was honestly adorable.

At that moment, something suddenly dawned on me. Something very, very important!

“What?! Holy crap!”

“Huh? What? Did you read my mind?! M-Maybe I’m a little too much of an open book—”

“Out of five circles, three were dark! That’s almost impossible to be a coincidence, because it’s like a five percent chance at best! Okay, let’s do this again! Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle!”

“Chirp! Dark blue, green, red, purple, black!”

“Water, wind, fire, lightning, dark! Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle!”

“Chichichirp! Red, blue, black, green, black!”

“Fire, ice, dark, wind, dark! That’s it! Finally, I’ve got it! It’s increasing the dark circle rates!”

This meant that the Blood-Dead Robe came with a hidden effect that increased the likelihood of dark circles! Or rather, maybe that meant that each Elemental Circle’s probability could be boosted based on the user’s equipment at the time.

The dark circle came with a temporary HP-boosting effect. Meanwhile, Quickdraw, a hidden weapon art that worked as the basis of my ultimates, increased in damage the lower the user’s HP was. The higher one’s maximum HP, the more potent its power at 1 HP. In short, HP-boosting effects were a direct damage boost to my ultimates, putting the “drama” in “drama cannon”!

If I could specifically whip out dark circles, then with the newly dramatized drama cannon, perhaps we could defeat the Hadean Rose!

“Woo-hoo! Hey, Akira! Let’s do our last run of Aswarth’s for the day! I wanna go see the Death Chariot!”

In contrast to my sparkly-eyed demeanor, my best friend wore an unusually icy glare.

“Err, Akira? What’s the matter?”

She sighed. “You’re always like this, Ren. Okay.”

“Uh... Sorry, I think?”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Sure, I’ll come with you! Let’s go!” Akira replied with the smile I was so used to seeing.

Extra: Friend Summon—Nozomi Akabane!

We decided to depart from the cottage for our last run of the day at Aswarth's Undersea Ruins.

"We've only got five people. Can we go without a sixth?" Yano asked.

Emily left us short a party member, but it wouldn't be much of an issue this time.

"Yeah. We're just gonna investigate, so five is enough," I responded.

"Oh, want me to phone a friend? I bet she's free right now," Akira suggested.

"Who?"

"Nozomi, duh."

"Wow. You two are close enough to just call each other up like that now?"

"Yeah, thanks to you."

"Cool. Let's do it, then."

"Okaaay!"

Shizuku cut in, "Halt. Are you referring to Ryuugou's granddaughter, Nozomi?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"But aren't you the Aoyagis' girl? I recall the Akabane and Aoyagi households were famous for their rivalry."

"Our families can do what they want, but we're our own people. We're gaming together, which shows we have similar interests. Why shouldn't we get along?" Akira smiled.

"Hmm, I see. You've matured."

"Huh? Um, what do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Forget I said it. Ahem." Shizuku cleared her throat.

“Okay, Ren. I’m gonna call Nozomi!”

“Awesome. Let’s wait, then.”

It was kinda like we were summoning a friend. I was slightly worried that we were normalizing calling on Akabane whenever we had trouble, though. Lately, she was working with our guild quite often. Maybe we ought to have her join Hell’s Crafters? That might be difficult, considering she was already in her brother’s guild.

Either way, a short while after Akira called her, Akabane came to the cottage.

“Quite bold of you to summon me so freely. Be grateful that I decided to grace you with my presence.”

So Akabane said, but she was clearly happy to have someone relying on her.

Heh. Putting up a frosty front as usual, I see.

“Sorry to call you out here, Nozomi.”

“Well, I do not mind. I suppose I was rather bored. Say, where is that Emily you mentioned? Here I was hoping to give her a piece of my mind.”

“Oh, no. She already went home.”

“My, is that so?”

“Yeah, her husband came to pick her up.”

“Excuse me? Her... husband?”

“Yeah, she’s married.”

“Excuse me?! This changes everything! If that’s the case, we were in real danger of turning to the dark side and—”

“H-Hey, Nozomi! No more of that!”

I felt totally lost. “What in the world are you two talking about?”

“Nothing, nothing! I swear!”

“Right! Not a thing!”

Akira and Akabane shook their heads vigorously.

“Uh, anyway, we wanna go to Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins, but we don’t have enough people. We figured if you weren’t busy, maybe you could come.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I do not mind. My brother said you all had such fun in Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins together.”

“Pardon, but don’t you think you and your brother may be embracing some rather... problematic clothing choices?” Shizuku posited, looking her up and down. “You’re at least far better off than him, but I’m still not altogether impressed by girls as young as you wearing such attire.”

It was the normal sword dancer gear. Sure, it did show off a lot of skin, but that was just the usual operating condition for a sword dancer. I kinda liked it, myself. The responsible adult that Shizuku was, she was being a little prudish.

“That’s of no concern to me. I’m not ashamed of these garments in the least.”

Indeed, Akabane was much the same as Akira in this regard, although she was more of a classic beauty than Akira and her general cuteness.

“Erm, that’s not really the issue here. It’s a problem of feminine modesty.”

Having heard that, Akira whispered to me, “I think we’d better just wear the yukatas around Shizuku, huh?”

“For sure. No point in rocking the boat.”

Akira turned to Akabane and suggested, “If it bothers Shizuku, how about you change too? We’ve got yukatas for days. They also have a pretty nice effect!”

“Hmm. If you say so, perhaps I shall.”

Thus, Akabane changed into a yukata as well.

“Okay! Now, let’s go to Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins!”

We headed to the entrance where, once again, I fed our peppy friend the lion head a tasty Warp Stone. This time, we warped to B6F. We were off to find that Death Chariot!

Once we arrived, however...

Bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop, bwop!

It's a Monster House!

Monsters are spawning in huge numbers all over the floor!

“Whaaat?!”

This is what we get after phoning a friend?! Do we have bad luck, or did they intentionally make this awful?! Sorry for wasting your time, Akabane!

Afterword

First off, thank you so much for buying my book. You've just read volume 5 of *Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy*!

We've fit quite a bit into this volume! Summer vacation fun, seaside resorts, festivals, yukatas, and more.

To be honest, *long* before I finished the manuscript for this, I was already telling the editing department, "We've got yukatas coming in this volume, so yukata Akira is going on the cover!" Once I finished, I breathed a sigh of relief to know that the cover still fit the contents.

This is my first time reaching volume 5 in one of my works. To make it this far, you would think it involved a lot of hard thinking about the story and a lot of careful formulation, but really, I've just been having fun writing!

I was one heck of a gaming addict before I became a light novel author, so when I get to talking about MMOs, I can just rattle it off with ease! It almost feels like the characters are acting and writing the story for me.

Back then, whenever I got off from my office job, I would spend all my free time playing MMOs. Honestly, I got even less sleep back then than I do now that I write light novels on the side! I'm still working at my day job, but as I'm doing a lot more writing than previous years, it's been a busy time. But comparing myself to the past me helps me keep on writing and writing.

The neck and shoulder pains resulting from spondylosis have somewhat improved, making things a little easier. Maybe part of that improvement was because I bought a nice 30,000-yen chair? I also have AC installed in my room as of this year. My writing environment is getting better and better over time.

I'll keep working my hardest, so I hope you'll join me along the way!

Finally, to my lead editor N, my lead artist Hika Akita, and everyone else involved, I thank all of you for your considerable efforts.

I *love* the yukata illustrations! Next volume, let's get some more pics of that

Death Chariot gear!

Well, see you next time!

A full-page illustration of a blonde anime-style girl with green eyes, wearing a white crop top and blue shorts with a brown belt. She is in a dynamic pose, appearing to be in water or a virtual environment with blue clouds and bubbles. Her right arm is raised, and she has a joyful expression.

Hayaken

Illustration: **Hika Akita**

“Good to
see you
again, Ren!
I was hoping
we’d meet up
someday,
but I never
expected it
to be here!”


EMILY MORETZ

Redefining the **META** at
VRMIMO Academy 5



“Wow!
My first
festival...
I’m so
excited!”

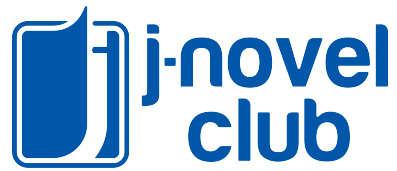
*This is what you
call a summer tradition.
Time to enjoy the
in-game festival
together!*

A full-page illustration of a young woman with short, dark brown hair and bangs. She is standing on a balcony with a wooden railing, looking slightly to her left with a gentle smile. She is wearing a light purple long-sleeved shirt under a dark blue jacket, and a dark blue skirt. A pearl necklace is visible around her neck. The background shows a night scene with warm, glowing lights from buildings or street lamps, creating a bokeh effect. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by oranges, yellows, and purples.

“You’re clearly
enjoying yourself.
Fond of the academy
and its game world,
are you?”

Akira happily
ran up to the stage.
Shizuku let out a deep
chuckle as she
approached.

SHIZUKU



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Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy: Volume 5

by Hayaken

Translated by Benjamin Daughety Edited by teiko

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